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Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk; or, Old Powder-Face and His Demons.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "THE HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY JACK," ETC., ETC.



"SAY, YOU WHAT-IS-IT, TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW. YOU SEE OLD KIT HAREFOOT'S NOT AFRAID OF YOU!"

Kit Harefoot,

THE WOOD-HAWK;

OR, Old Powder-Face and His Demons.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
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CHAPTER I.

THE BLEEDING KNIFE.

"FOOLED ag'in! Ef I war a 'bilever, I'd think that some speerit hed come back an' war tryin' to rap me outen the old shanty. But I never let my noggin git full o' that stuff what sets tables to dancin' an' drums to beatin' in a dark room. But I did hear suthin' like a woodpecker's bill on my door. Thar warn't anything human-like in the sound; but it war peckaty-speck, like the bird, or like a leetle hammer. Confound it! hyar I am, fur the second time, fooleed by speerits arter all, I guess!"

The speaker, a tall, rawboned customer, of about fifty years of age, stood in the doorway of a little cabin which nestled in the depths of one of the fertile bottoms of the Missouri, between Yankton and Fort Sully. It stood midway between the two places.

His face was framed in a mass of black hair; his skin was tanned by wind and sun, and his garb befookeved him a happy specimen of the "wood-hawk," or one of those men who are to be found all over the West, chopping wood from Government or Indian land, and selling it to the boats that ply the upper Missouri.

Beneath the bronze on the wood-hawk's skin was to be seen a puzzled, if not a troubled, expression. A singular noise like that produced by the bill of a bird had twice called him to his cabin door. He did not know what to make of it. Not wishing to appear superstitious, he had tried to laugh his fears down; but the effort was a lamentable failure.

Besides, it was getting dark; the old cottonwoods were casting long shadows, and over the waters of the Missouri, faintly visible at the end of a leafy aisle, hung the pall of night.

"I'll go back an' listen ag'in!" said the man, almost starting at the sound of his own voice. "Mebbe it war a bird after all. It warn't a speerit! If I git to thinkin' that way, I'll give in an' die jest like old Playfair did up to Buford Agency."

With the last word on his lip, Kit Harefoot, the wood-hawk, turned to enter his cabin, when something on the door struck his notice.

"Great Moses!" he cried, starting back, which action he performed at the imminent risk of falling over a gaunt Indian dog that had glided from the hut on the opening of the door. "Speerit nor woodpecker, nary one! Somebody's bin hyar tryin' to put up a nota. Mighty queer place for the document, I'm thinkin'. What does it say? Here, Mango, git up an' help me read it!"

The dog, seemingly a lazy representative of his species, made out to give his master a strange look, but did not obey.

Kit closed the door, and brought the paper into better view. It was hanging by one corner, into which a small tack was driven; the poster having evidently been frightened from his work had left it unfinished. The paper was a thick, dark-looking affair; but the sharp eyes of the wood-hawk discerned writing upon it.

He bent forward with great eagerness to read it, and ran his dusky finger over the document as he made it out, word by word, as a student would treat an inscription in Arabic.

Lower sunk the sun behind the waters of the Missouri, while Wood-hawk Kit deciphered the "nota" pinned to his door. As he studied, great drops of perspiration started on his bronzed face, but did not deter him. He was a man of indomitable will, and, as he kept stolidly at his task, all thoughts of "speerits" flew away.

At last, with an ejaculation of joy that startled the dog, the wood-hawk straightened up and looked proud. He had won the victory; the notice had given way to his perseverance, and he could now read it without a single mistake:

I GIVE NOTICE

That I am back in these parts, an' that thar ain't enough beneath the canopy of heaven to drive me away. I hev cum hyar to stay, an' anybody who interferes with my business will git an arrow in his heart. I am not alone! So, let everybody who reads this beware, if they want their hearts to keep on beatin' in the nat'r' way.

OLD POWDER-FACE.

"Written by DEVIL DICK."

Wood-hawk Kit read the notice several times before he ventured to make any remarks.

"Back ag'in, eh?" he said aloud to himself. "Cusid be the day that brought you back into this country, old Powder-Face. An' you ar' not alone, you say. Well, thar ain't an honest foot behind you, that's sartin. Now, what hez Kit Harefoot to do? Thar's plenty of good timber hyar, an' the p'int is a good one fur market. I hate to leave the place, seein' as how I'm snugly fixed, with no one to feed but Mango, an' he's able to git more'n half his grub himself. Shall I go?"

He looked up at the little hut with a backwoodman's adoration for the humble roof reared by his own labor, and involuntarily clenched his dark-skinned hand.

"It means *me!*" he grated. "The person what tacked it up thar meant to tell me—Kit Harefoot—that a lot of demons who hates the ground he tread on, ar' back ag'in. Do they know that I live here? Mebbe they thought the cabin was deserted when they stuck it up. No! that's bad argument. Powder-Face knows who lives hyar. Mango, wake up! Powder-Face hez come back!"

At mention of the singular cognomen which was uttered in a raised voice, the dog sprung erect, and, in a fierce growl, showed his teeth. The dark hairs on his short thick neck rose like bristles, and he exhibited a pair of eyes which seemed to emit sparks of flame.

"Ah! you hevn't furgot the old chap, Mango," cried Harefoot, delighted by the animal's manner.

"Well, how could you, seein' as how he shot an arrow clean through you an' hung you over a fire to roast, jest because you belonged to old Kit. That's right, Mango; take a look at the old scar, and growl your hatred at him. Now he's come back, an' who're at his heels mercy knows. What's to be done? Leave the old hut, an' turn our backs upon 'em! Did we ever do it, Mango? Hey you got it set down from anybody?"

The dog stood before the wood-hawk, with an almost human stare fixed upon his face. There was a strong feeling of sympathy and love between master and dog.

"Gosh! I wish you could read, Mango," continued the wood-hawk, touching the notice with his dexter finger. "It war written by Devil Dick, a half Injun, half white man, I'm thinkin'."

For a moment the man watched the dog, which, eager to read the writing, had risen upon his hinder feet, and was standing erect, with his fore paws pressed against the planks of the door.

"I'd like to see Nina first," Kit said, as if addressing somebody before him. "This nota of Old Powder-Face's comin' back means fur us, dog an' man, traps an' all, to git. But I'm not goin' till I see Nina, an' mebbe not then."

The shadows now hid the words on the door from the eyes of the stalwart wood-hawk; but the parchment was still visible.

Kit caught it with finger and thumb and seemed about to jerk it loose, when a figure bounded from the shade of the cottonwoods and alighted, like a rubber ball, between man and dog.

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated the wood-hawk, as he involuntarily shrunk from the apparition. "Who on ar' you, an' whar did you come from?"

There was no immediate reply; but the flash of a knife caught the woodman's eye, and, with a dull thud, it was buried in the door, effectually pinning Powder-Face's notice to the heavy planks.

"That is *my* answer," cried the new-comer, turning upon the wood-hawk, while he pointed to the knife quivering in the wood. "I want my knife to stick there till Powder-Face and his demons see it. I am not afraid of them, and I may have some accounts to settle in these parts. Kit Harefoot, if you pull that knife out before Powder-Face sees it, your dog will be without a master."

There was determination in the tones that fell upon wood-hawk Kit's ear, and he could not help starting back and crying in amazement:

"A boy, by hokey! Why, my little fellar, you're showin' more pluck than sense. Bless me, if I couldn't lift you with one hand!"

He made a hasty stride forward as he uttered the last word and grasped the boy's arm; but the member was almost instantly wrenched from his gripe, and the youth with a pair of flashing eyes and insulted men, stood free.

"Obey me in regard to that knifel!" he cried. "If you want to keep out of the way of Powder-Face and his demons, fly early, but pull my blade out if you dare! We need not be enemies, Wood-hawk Kit. I am here because I have debts to pay. Who I am you will know before Powder-Face gets your scalp!"

Back into the shadows sprung the little speaker, and before his final sentence had ceased to ring in the woodman's ear, he had disappeared as suddenly as he had come upon the scene.

An expression of mystery enshrouded old Kit's face, and the dog, looking up from between his master's legs, whether he had retreated with a frightened growl upon the boy's appearance, added no little ludicrousness to the tableau.

"Am I dreamin'?" cried Wood-hawk Kit, striking a log with his fist. "Because I war talkin' about speerits, hev I see'd one? No! by the big boats of the Big Muddy! Thar's a knife in my door, an' it was not speerit what druv it thar!"

Wood-hawk Kit put forth his hand and touched the buck-horn handle of the knife. It felt loose, and from the under rim of the end something dripped upon his fingers.

"Snakes an' fishes, Mango!" he gasped, shrinking back with horror. "The pesky knife is bleedin'! Speerits after all, by the Big Muddy!"

With the most terrified of countenances, the inhabitant of the hut in the bottom fled with his dog at his heels—fled through the forest, nor stopped until he reached the bank of the Missouri where, in the light of the rising moon, he stared at the blood on his hand.

CHAPTER II.

THE USELESS ERRAND.

Wood-hawk Kit held his hand in the light of the moon, and for many moments stared at the dark fresh stains on the hard surface.

The woodman was mystified, and, to tell all, not a little scared.

Unlike the majority of the wood-hawks to be

found along the upper Missouri to-day, Kit was an American. He had not allied himself by marriage, as hundreds of his comrades had done, to any Indian family; he lived alone, happy in the company of Mango, the dog, and contented with the life of a wood-chopper.

As he stood on the bank of the muddiest of Western rivers, Kit could not but think of the man who had announced in a startling manner that he had returned.

It was the middle of October, 1875.

Powder-Face was not a stranger to that part of the country. There were lonely graves in the recesses of the rich bottoms, and the ruins of huts along the streams which told of him.

One year prior to the opening of our story he was the terror of the country. At the head of a band of cut-throats, as merciless as himself, he had broken up the wood-hawk's home, intercepted trains on the Government trails, and brutally butchered the whites. For a long time the "blue-coats" sought the fiend in vain; more than one detachment found itself ambushed and almost totally destroyed; the country between Forts Randall and Sully became uninhabited.

The Government issued orders that Powder-Face should be hunted down without regard to life, and an exciting little Indian campaign was inaugurated. The wood-hawk laid aside his ax and took up the rifle. The arch fiend was driven from ambush to ambush, until in the midst of a "blizzard," one of those terrible storms that afflict that country, he disappeared as effectually as if the sand had buried him.

During the months that followed the country began to improve; once more the sound of the wood-hawk's ax, mingled with his wild song, echoed throughout the forest, and the train appeared again on the old trail. The good old days were coming back.

But now what a prospect again rose before Kit Harefoot's eyes, as he stood on the banks of the "Big Muddy!"

Powder-Face and his demons were coming back! All that misery and death which the land had passed through would have to be gone over again. What had the contented wood-hawks and the adventuresome emigrants done to deserve such terrible treatment?

The twitching of the wood-hawk's lips; the sudden clenching of the hand that hung at his side, told that he was thinking of these things.

"So, you're comin' back, eh?" he suddenly ejaculated. "Well, come back an' be hanged! But I'd like to know who tacked that paper onto my door. Some partic'lar friend, perhaps—some one what thought he might be doin' me a favor. I'm much obliged to him; but I hev my doubts as to him bein' Kit Harefoot's friend. Thar's the boy—wher'd he spring from? I've been over these parts a thousand times, but never set eyes on the youngster afore. Fishes an' tadpoles! but things are fittin' kind o' ghostly-like—a bleedin' knife in my doct, a new boy, an' old Powder-Face comin' back. Ugh! it makes a chill run down my back. Bless me, if the moon ain't changin' its color. Thar's bad times comin' all these things are signs of some token!"

With a genuine shudder of horror, Wood-hawk Kit wiped the blood from his hand upon his dingy overalls, and turned toward the south.

"Thar may be a train on the road!" he said. "Powder-Face hasn't l'arnt any good deeds since he left hyar. I wonder if they know it at Randall or Sully? The old demon will catch Uncle Sam asleep, p'raps, if I don't warn 'im."

For a minute the wood-hawk remained where he had halted, a picture of indecision.

"Duty calls me from these parts for the present, but I hate to go without seein' Nina. I kin send word down to Randall on the boat. I'll go to Sully, an' tell 'em about Powder-Face comin' back."

Having decided upon his course of action, the wood-hawk was about to leave the spot, when his dog suddenly ran between his legs and uttered a sharp growl which betokened fright.

"Hello! don't upset a fellar!" cried Kit, retaining his equilibrium with no little effort. "What on earth, Mango, do you see? another speerit?"

Kit looked forward and saw the object which had aroused the dog.

Not thirty feet away laid the trunk of a gigantic tree, but partially divested of its branches by the ax. A shower of soft moonlight lay upon it from top to stump. Standing upon the body at the first fork was a being which made the wood-hawk, brave as a lion as we shall soon see, start back with a cry.

From the feet clear up to the throat this object was human, but the head was that of an enormous eagle, the beak, the eyes—all were there! One of the hands—not claws—clipped the stock of a repeating rifle, the other pointed south—toward Fort Randall.

"Great Jehosaphat! the kentry's turnin' upside down!" cried the wood-hawk. "Speerits an' eagle-men all in one night! An' all to say that old Powder-Face hez come back among us. Say, you what-is-it, tell me what you know. You see old Kit Harefoot's not afraid ov you!"

With this declaration of bravery the wood-hawk spurned his shivering dog and sprung boldly forward.

"Halt!" came a strange voice from behind the beak. "There's work for you at the South. Old Powder-Face is in the land again and a train has left Fort Randall. Go and tell it to turn back—to push forward again with all its might. If necessary, Sully will be warned. Go this infinite, Kit Harefoot. Let no grass grow under your feet, and you'll be doing your people a great service."

The woodman had listened spellbound to the words as they seemed to emanate from the eagle-beak.

"The thing speaks English," remarked Kit to himself. "I guess I'd better go. But, I say—"

He looked forward again; but the tree was deserted.

"Gone, by hokey!" the wood-hawk ejaculated.

"Mango, did you see the critter leave?"

"Go, Kit Harefoot!" came the same-warning voice though the speaker was now unseen. "Think of the women and children in that train."

"That settles it! Here goes Kit," and without waiting another moment, he bounded from the spot, followed by Mango, as eager to depart as dog could well be.

"Thar's no use of goin' home when ev'ry moment is precious," the woodman said, as he hurried along.

"I kin stop at old Plotty's an' git a gun."

The moon as it rose majestically toward the azure zenith that night, saw Wood-hawk Kit pushing through the wood that bordered the Missouri. Close at his heels followed the canine companion which had shared his cot through the long and dreary winters of the past.

The man had a big heart in his breast. Woodman and uncouth and unlettered as he was, he was ever ready to respond to calls for help, and while he was buried among the bottoms of the Missouri, many a woman in her frontier home spoke in glowing terms of some noble deed his rough hands had performed.

Fort Randall was sixty miles from his cabin; but he was on the Government trail now, and he hoped to meet the train mentioned by the man with the eagle's head, long before he saw the fort.

On went Wood-hawk Kit, in that tireless gait peculiar to the western Indian. At times he was in the moonlight that rested upon the bank of the Missouri, and then he plunged into the shadows again.

All at once he halted, and bade his dog, bristling up and growling, be still.

"The train a ready?" ejaculated the woodman, as certain sounds borne over the wings of the wind came up the Government trail. "Why, I hevn't got to Plotty's yit."

To Plotty's? No, Wood-hawk Kit, and you may never see the place.

Harsh upon the man's ears fell a peal of boisterous laughter, and then into a spot of moonshine where the trees were few roared a band of Indians.

The wood-hawk could not but start; and his dog, uttering a bark of defiance, instantly revealed his whereabouts.

"Hang the luck!" grated the man. "Mango, you've got me into a pickle now, I guess. Oh, heaven! can't I save the train?"

He turned toward the river and sprung forward, revealing himself to the savages.

Wild yells greeted him, and the volley that shook the air was deafening.

"Oh, you demons!" cried Kit, staggering back from the water. "Oh, you infarnal fiends, what hev come back to scourge the land! Giv' me a rifle, an' I'll face the hull lot of ye. Kit Harefoot is not dead yit. He'll live to see the last man of ye die as ye deserve."

The volley had stricken the wood-hawk, for he dropped to his knees on the bank; but, while he uttered the words we have just recorded, he stood erect, shaking his fist at the fiends in the forest.

When he turned, it was to face the river.

"I'll save the train yit," the wood-hawk cried; and the next moment he plunged into the Missouri, and her waters closed over him.

For a moment nobody appeared on the bank; but at length a horse suddenly halted there, and his rider, a giant Sioux Indian, rose in the stirrups, and looked up and down the river.

There was a flash in the dark eyes of this person, and a spectator would have shrunk with a shudder from his face, so dark, hideous and devilish was its aspect.

"Nothing!" he said, in a tone of disappointment. "It might have been the Eagle-boy! If so, he shed no blood this time."

As suddenly as the fiend appeared on the bank, he turned away to be swallowed up, as it were, by the wood.

Still nothing was to be seen of Wood-hawk Kit.

If living, he might as well give up his attempt to save the train, for the Indian could tell him that its people, with their faithful horses, had been indiscriminately butchered.

And that almost within gunshot of Fort Randall.

CHAPTER III.

BEAR AND FOR BEAR.

One hour after the woodman's departure from the spot where he had encountered the eagle-headed apparition, a figure halted before the door of his lonely hut.

The paper with the knife piercing it still clung to the door, which stood ajar. A more than common loneliness greeted the new-comer, who was no less a person than the youth whom we have seen drive the blade into the oaken plank.

He was a strongly built and handsome youth, who might have passed his seventeenth year. He was well-formed, and rather fantastically clad, for his cap was ornamented with the tail of the pine squirrel, and his jacket, or wood-frock, with pieces of otter-skin. His hand held a rifle, the only weapon visible about his person, for the sheath in his leather belt was knifeless.

There was a defiant gleam in his large eyes as they rested on the strange device on the door, and for several moments he contemplated it in silence.

"No harm to enter," he said, pushing open the door, and stepping inside. "Maybe I can discover something about—hello! Wood-hawk Kit was at supper when surprised."

The boy halted suddenly at the backwoods table, which stood at the eastern window. Upon a large tin plate lay a haunch of cold venison, which Kit and Mango were discussing when the taps on the door aroused them. Near the meat stood a jug of water; the other objects on the table were few and uncoth.

"Kit, I believe I'll help myself," the new-comer said, with a smile. "The meat looks good, and you'll not get back for several days; so here goes for a supper which I did not count on."

A taste tickled the boy's palate, and setting the rifle aside, he fell to with an appetite seemingly sharpened by travel.

Nothing occurred to mar that stolen feast until the youngster had caused the disappearance of a goodly portion of the haunch. He stood before the table facing the window, through which a flood of autumn moonlight streamed.

Suddenly a shadow shot over the table, and the piece of meat which the boy was lifting to his lips fell from his hands when he looked up. At the same moment came the crash of glass, and a gigantic paw darted upon the juicy supper.

"Not so fast, old chap!" cried the boy, and quick as flash he seized the hunk and snatched it away, just as the shining claws of a bear were about to fasten themselves upon it.

"You're mighty unceremonious, it seems to me!" he continued, looking boldly at the hideous head observable in the window, with flashing eyes, and teeth and tongue, all complete. "You had better wait till you've been asked to tea, old muffin. Now go way, and let Lee Wolfe finish his meal in peace."

There was a half-hidden threat in the speaker's tones, and his hand darted to the rifle as he spoke.

The huge roamer of the forest gave a short growl, withdrew his preyless paw, and dropped with a heavy thud to the ground.

"He's mad," the little hunter said. "I saw fight in his eyes. He'll try to get the meat again."

Speaking still, the youth turned to the door, perhaps for the purpose of shutting it against the beast.

It stood ajar as he had left it upon entering.

A step brought him to the spot, and his fingers had scarcely touched the wood when it flew open as if a thunderbolt had fallen against it, and the cinnamon fell into the room.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" cried Lee Wolfe, springing back in time to escape being crushed by the body of the bear. "This is breaking up a supper with a vengeance. But I'll do the best I can."

The bear had evidently believed that the door was quite closed, and therefore had thrown his whole weight upon it to force it in. Hence his unexpected fall full length upon the floor, almost at the youth's very feet. But, despite his great body, bruin is very active; he was on his feet in a moment, and started toward the table upon which the coveted venison lay.

Still bent on stealing, eh?" ejaculated the heroic little trailer, and a moment later a deafening roar, followed by a fierce growl of pain, filled the hut.

In the midst of the smoke the boy retreated and began to reload; he knew that the bear was wounded, and while driving home the ball he heard the table overturned by bruin in his agony.

"Badly pinned!" said he. "Another shot and I'll not need my knife to finish with."

But he was prevented making the desired shot by the contortions of the bear which, having become entangled among the supports of the table, was writhing like a giant in efforts to free himself.

"Stay there and fight the table, then!" the youth suddenly cried, seeing the moonlight in the doorway again. "I guess you've earned what venison I left, so we'll not dispute ownership any longer. It didn't belong to either of us, old chap; we'd both be threshed by Wood-hawk Kit if he found us here. That's right! the table's on top now. Whirl it up, old muffin, and give it that brotherly hug which you had intended for me."

Laughing at the fight going on between the heavy table and the king of the upper Missouri region, Lee Wolfe bounded toward the door, and landed beyond the brawny threshold.

The mysterious boy might have congratulated himself on his escape from the embraces of the venison thief, if time had been granted him.

Certain it is that he landed in the moonlight with an ejaculation of satisfaction which the next moment was turned into a cry of amazement.

Above the noise of the ludicrous battle going on in the cabin sounded the sternest of commands accompanied by the direst of threats.

"Halt and throw away your gun, or die!"

Well might the boy start back and spring toward the hut where the bear was freeing himself from the table, for a dozen Indians astride of splendid horses sat before him, hideous in that dress and expression which were known and hated all along the northern Amazon.

Instinctively the boy raised his rifle as he saw the feathered heads; the click of the lock sounded unusually loud, and he saw the flash of carbine barrels over the horses' ears.

"Down with the gun!" thundered the same voice. "Little Death-Step, we've got you at last. Where's your eagle-head now? Come, my little tiger, be civil. Say, what's in the hut?"

The boy's answer was the throwing of his rifle to his shoulder, and before a carbine could check his action, a loud report cleft the air, and an Indian fell without a groan from his horse.

"That is the answer I give you, Powder-Face!" he shouted. "You've heard it before, and these woods shall hear it again."

These startling words came to the savage band

through the pall of smoke which hung between them and the slayer.

They elicited a yell of rage, and the Indians for a moment appeared disconcerted. They were confounded by the deadly response which the youth shot at their demand.

Suddenly a puff of river wind dashed the smoke aside, and they saw Little Death-Step turn.

"A run for life!" he said, under his breath. "Another one—"

He said no more, for the cabin door flew open, and with a cry, in which triumph was mingled with pain, out came the bear.

The red demons involuntarily started back at the sight of the enraged brute, which by some unlucky chance had thrown himself into the youth's path.

Already Little Death-Step had thrown himself forward in flight. He saw his new danger, but could not turn aside.

The cinnamon recognized his old enemy, and rose; he even sprung forward to the encounter, and an instant later Little Death-Step fell into the powerful arms!

Boy and bear went to the ground together, while a peal of blood-curdling laughter from the savages greeted this new and terrible state of affairs.

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH-SHOTS FROM THE MOON.

For a single moment it seemed that the Indians were going to be mere spectators of the struggle for the mastery between Little Death-Step and the wounded bear.

The animal was one of the largest of his species, and, rendered fierce by the shot received in Wood-hawk Kit's cabin, the termination of the battle, if uninterrupted, could be easily foreseen.

The boy's rifle was wrenching from his grasp by the closing of the strong arms of the bear, which seemed to inclose him in a vice, but, notwithstanding this, he used his utmost strength, forgetting, as it seemed, that if victorious he would immediately fall into other hands from which escape was not to be thought of.

But the Indians did not long remain passive lookers-on.

With startling suddenness, accompanied by a cry, a stalwart fellow leaped from his horse and bounded to the spot where the struggle was going on. This savage, if savage he was, for despite his Indian garments and paint, he possessed much of the physical characteristics of a white man, carried a long-bladed knife in his band. Over his left arm he hastily threw a buck-skin garment, glistening with a profusion of beads, which resembled a fancy cloak or Mexican serape.

Thus prepared, he sprung fearlessly forward, and with astonishing quickness gave the bear a blow which caused him to turn upon the new enemy. The blade was withdrawn bloody, and a tide of crimson followed the stroke, which, when dealt, seemed to menace the white boy's life, so continuous were the contortions of the bear.

"Another such a blow, Indian!" cried Little Death-Step, who felt the quiver which passed over the animal, and seeing the Indian standing ready, knife in hand, to deliver a second stroke.

"Ha! ha! and here it is!" quickly came the reply, and Lee Wolfe saw the red arm descend again like a thunderbolt.

A cry, almost human in its intonation, now pealed from the throat of the beast, and the crushing arms relaxed their hold. Little Death-Step rolled from the bear's embrace, as the forest monarch rose to greet his knife-armed foe. The Indians, in their own language, applauded their comrade's strokes, and standing erect, with the protected arm extended to receive bruin, and with the knife drawn back, he awaited the attack.

But the king of the far West was near his end. He advanced toward the red-man on his hind feet, but, before the knife descended for the third time, he staggered to one side from loss of blood and fell heavily, amid the plaudits of the spectators.

It was not without some show of agility that the fearless youth escaped from being crushed by the carcass of the bear. He saw his danger and sprung aside, but found himself in the exultant grasp of a veritable giant, who had leaped from his steed for the purpose of seizing him.

Now that the *coup de grace* had been put to the bear, the hand turned its attention to the boy captive.

There was a general dismounting from the steeds, and the boy hero found himself in the midst of the most ferocious-looking set of painted demons ever seen in the region of the Missouri.

Chief among them stood the personage who had captured Little Death-Step.

We have described him as being hideous of countenance in the chapter that narrates Wood-hawk Kit's plunge into the river. He certainly deserves the description. His face was almost as black as that of an Ashante negro. It was repulsive in appearance, and but for the long, straight hair that fell to his shoulders, he might have been mistaken for an African. He was clothed in a dirty buck-skin jacket, belted and pistoled at the waist, and the leggings of the same material were old and much worn. If one could have seen his face in the daytime, he would have declared that at some time or other a quantity of powder had been blown beneath the skin. This was Powder-Face, the terror of the upper Missouri, a fiend who was called an Indian, yet who was, by many, believed to be a white man.

His eyes, plainly to be seen in all their tigerish ferocity, for Powder-Face had no eyelashes, gleamed like a wild beast's, as he held Little Death-Step at arm's length.

The boy returned the look without shrinking; on the contrary, there was defiance in his glance.

Before a word was spoken on either side, the slayer or of the bear came up. As he appeared upon the scene, with one sweep of the hand he brushed a mass of long hair from his forehead, and Little Death-Step saw a line of white high over the eyes.

He started, well knowing now that, at least, one member of Powder-Face's band was white.

"Caught!" suddenly cried the scourge of the Missouri country, shaking his captive; "all trails have an end, my little tiger, and here ends yours. Where is your eagle-head? We are going to roast you alive, and we want you to die half-bird, half-boy."

The fiendishness implied by the villain's words would have dismayed many a strong trapper of the North-west, but the young destroyer did not flinch.

"My eagle's head, if I possess one, is for you to find!" he said, looking around upon the evil faces that hemmed him in. "Do you think that I fear you, Old Powder-Face? There stick's my knife in Wood-hawk Kit's door—my answer to your coming back. When you left I was here, and I told you that your return, if you ever returned, would find me here still."

"Whar's Kit?" suddenly cried the slayer of the bear.

"I know not."

"Here! no lies, my little chap," and the knife, red with brain's blood, was threateningly displayed.

"Prove that I lie," was the response, "and I'll grant you leave to tickle my ribs with your blade."

The man looked baffled and grated his teeth.

"Well, never mind," he said, "we're going to spoil this intimacy between you and Kit, and spoil it to-night. Now, Powder-Face, find that eagle-head, and then we'll finish our work."

Powder-Face looked at the destroyer again.

"Give up the eagle-head!" he demanded, fiercely.

"I cannot give up that which I do not possess. If you find it you will be welcome to it—that's all."

"Find it we will if you've hidden it beneath your skin," was the answer.

The next instant the young Indian-slaver was rudely divested of his jacket. It was torn off without ceremony and cast upon the ground. His cap was picked up from the scene of the combat with the bear, and rent by scarlet hands.

The demons of the West sought that eagle-head which had followed them in their inhuman depredations like a thing of death. The jacket, torn from Little Death-Step's body, was cut in pieces before his eyes; Powder-Face tore wide the front of his hunting-shirt, and searched beneath it for the coveted article.

"I tell you I have it not!" the boy destroyer reiterated. "Skinning me alive will not produce it. Powder-Face, it will follow you to the very end of life; it will look down upon you in the agonies of death. I have sworn—"

A yell of rage from the arch demon's throat, broke the boy's sentence.

"What! my tiger, do you expect to escape and trail us again?" he cried. "You threaten to hold that infernal bird-head over me when I am dying! We shall decide that question here. Stealing Fox, the rope—the rope."

Powder-Face whirled upon a 'chunky' Indian who held a coil of rope in his hand—one of the band's agents of death—and the cord was flung at the chief.

"Yes, my little death's-head, we'll end all matters here!" came in fiendish tones from Powder-Face. "We've come back to leave no living white thing in this country. Look at the scalps in the belts of my death-angels. We struck a train back yonder. Sixty-two persons besides the few blue coats that guarded it! Ha! ha! not one escaped to carry the news to Randall—to tell old Mitchell that Powder-Face and his demons have come back!"

An involuntary sigh welled up from Death-Step's heart, when, with demoniac glee, the fate of the train which he had sent Wood-hawk Kit to save was announced.

He shut his teeth hard, and clenched his hands.

Oh, for the day of vengeance!

"Now for the air dance!" cried Powder-Face, exhibiting a noose at one end of the cord which turned out to be an Indian lariat.

The boy was seized by several hands, while Powder-Face himself adjusted the noose over his head.

Without ceremony, the destroyer was dragged to a spot directly beneath the nearest tree, and by a dexterous throw, the lariat was tossed over a large limb.

"Going to follow us again, eh?" cried Powder-Face, leering into the calm eyes of the deadliest of the demon-fiend ever had.

"I have not lied, as you shall see!" was the reply. "Even after to-night you will find the death-head on your trail, and the crack of the rifle shall still be followed by the sleep of death."

"Ho! ho! Dead men tell no tales," cried the bear-killer. "Up with the little imp, Powder-Face! If we listen to such idle talk, we will miss the boat."

The boat? Having butchered the occupants of a train, were the fiends going to spread havoc throughout the packet at that hour descending the Missouri to Fort Randall, and then perhaps, not far away? But they could not succeed there.

Powder-Face turned to Little Death-Step, and begged pardon for neglecting "important business."

He waved his hand to the two savages who held the cord, and they bent themselves to their allotted task.

The frontier destroyer was jerked from the ground. A quick, sharp cry, broken by the tightening of the lariat, fell from his lips as he went up.

"Now, make the rope fast!" cried Powder-Face. "Wood-hawk Kit will get an inkling of his fate when he comes back. Hold! pull the little tiger higher.

By the death seeds he's sown among us! we'll hang the bear to his feet. What say you, Dick?"

"Capital!" said the bear-killer. "There! he's high enough now. Hold him there till we lug the carcass up."

The speaker sprang to the body of the cinnamon and soon, aided by several Indians, had succeeded in dragging it beneath the tree. With hands ever ready to carry out the most villainous projects, he fell to fastening ropes to the bear's hinder quarters. When he had completed the work, he turned to the spectators.

"Now lend Devil Dick a hand, and he'll make boy and bear inseparable in death!"

Several members of the band sprung forward to assist their confederate, and the heavy carcass was lifted from the ground, when—

Bang! bang! bang! in startling succession, and the bear fell from hands suddenly stricken with death!

With cries of horror every rascal turned toward the river, from whence the death-shots came. Devil Dick, who had escaped death, leaped to Powder-Face's side and grasped his arm.

"Look yonder!" he cried, in terrified tones, heard by every demon. "He said the death head would follow us. There it is! By my hope of life! the accused eagle's head is in the moon!"

Devil Dick was pointing at the full round orb of night, plainly visible, and seemingly quite near.

At that instant every member of that hideous band started back with chilling cries of mortal terror, for apparently photographed against the beautiful silver disk of the satellite was an immense eagle's head!

And before they could recover, bang! bang! came the death-shots again, straight from the moon, and two more Indians fell beside their chief.

What followed can be briefly told.

The remaining demons threw themselves upon their horses and dashed madly away, leaving Little Death-Step suspended in mid-air over the tragic spot.

Old Powder-Face was foremost in flight, while at his heels thundered Devil Dick, afraid to look back lest he should see the apparition swooping down upon him.

CHAPTER V.

GOOD AND BAD LUCK.

THE thoroughly frightened savages had scarcely disappeared from the scene of their discomfiture when a horse dashed up from the river, and halted beside the suspended body of the young destroyer.

The occupant of the saddle was neatly dressed in a close-fitting suit of buck-skin, ornamented precisely like the boy's already described, but the physique was not so pronounced as his. On the other hand, there was much of the feminine about the newcomer; the hands were small, womanish, and, for that lawless country, white. But from the shoulders up rose that hideous eagle-head, which had so frightened the Missouri murderers when seen outlined against the disk of the smiling moon.

Following the dropping of the rein on the steed's neck, one of the hands went up and grasped the boy-destroyer's wrist. It remained there a moment, when the figure rose in the stirrups and the rope was severed above Little Death-Step's head. He fell into the arms of his rescuer, whom his weight forced into the saddle, and the strange head was bent over him in great anxiety.

For several moments such was the tableau presented in the moonlight that fell upon Wood-hawk Kit's hut. Then the hand of the rescuer fumbled among the gray feathers at the thorax, and, as if impelled by secret springs, the eagle-head flew back, displaying the unmistakable face of a young girl. It was a wildly handsome face; but at that moment pale and marked with painful anxiety. Some dark hair was visible in the strange cap just flung back from the head, and the restless eyes in color matched it well. The repeating rifle slung upon the wood-girl's back told the story of the shots "from the moon."

Lee Wolfe's face was white and deathly.

There was a dark ring about his throat, the mark of old Powder-Face's rope. He looked like a person who had been hanged till he was dead!

With a troubled countenance in which much love was expressed, the girl regarded the youth lying a dead weight on her left arm, while with her right hand she smoothed the locks of stray hair back from his forehead. Overhead still dangled the fatal rope.

It was a scene for the painter.

"Not dead, Lee!" she suddenly cried, as if the brain had throbbed under her hand. "But you are very near the cold waters. Oh! Lee! Lee! will you not live to help me pay these demons for the work they did one year ago?"

Of course there was no reply, and a look of despair came to the girl's eyes.

"Why did I not come sooner?" she cried, upbraidingly. "Why did I loiter on the river-bank to see that villainous old packet go by? He lost his life by my tardiness. If I had not stopped to wave my cap at the old boat, I should have rescued him before they drew him up. If you die, Lee, I'll make this wood a very terror land. I will give no rest to my feet, none to my rifle, until the band of fiends who hung you have disappeared from the face of the earth. Lee—I wonder what he would say if he heard me call him 'Lee,' just as if I loved him?" and for the first time a smile wreathed the speaker's lips, brightening her matchless beauty.

Then she glanced from the inanimate form in her arms to the figures stretched in the startling grasp of death where they had fallen.

"Thank Heaven, I did it!" the girl-slayer cried.

"Five from twenty leave fifteen, and they shall soon feel the hand of Nina Morrow."

She gathered up the reins, and dashed from the spot with Little Death-Step in her arms.

As she rode away the eagle-head resting on her shoulders with the beak turned up to the sky gave her a singular appearance. She looked like a being, half-human, half-bird, for the cape of her jacket with its long otter fringe rising and falling with her motion in the saddle looked like a pair of wide wings.

The girl who had called herself Nina Morrow did not stop until she reached the bank of the Missouri at the mouth of one of its numerous tributaries. The moon which had witnessed so many startling scenes in that one night was now setting, sinking, as it seemed amid the waves of the river, so that the mouth of the little arm was partly in shadow when Nina reached it.

She halted at the very edge of the water, and, as her horse eagerly lowered his head to drink, a low whistle, sounding like a bird-call, pealed from her throat. After a repetition, a similar cry which seemed to come from some point far up the tributary reached her ears, and she hastily drew the horse from the water.

Leaving the halting-place she proceeded up the stream for a short distance, when she came suddenly upon a wood-hawk's cabin, ill-revealed, because of the trees which stood around.

Straight toward the door the wood-girl rode; but, with the repeating-rifle cocked in her right hand, and leaning forward, she rapped as gently as she could with the muzzle of the weapon.

In response to her knock, there came a voice from within:

"Who's out there?"

"Me! Quick, Arvan, and let me in!"

"Me?" came the response, in doubt and perplexing tones. "Parbleu! that's funny. If we let every 'me' in, these times, we'd have no roof to shelter us."

"It is Nina, then. You answered my call, and told me by it that every thing was safe. Now open the door, or I'll blow it open with my gun, and maybe send the bullet through you, old Arvan."

"Save, no!" was the cry, in accents of terror; and the door flew open, and a rough-looking old wood-hawk made his appearance.

"Here! take my load!" said Nina, leaning forward with Little Death-Step. "Don't ask any questions now. You know more about these things than I do, and I want your help. Take my load, I say! Pray God he is not dead, for I tell his pulse all the way to this spot!"

With a hundred questions on his tongue, the wood-hawk approached and took the almost lifeless burden which Nina let fall into his arms.

The girl dismounted, and followed the dark-faced Frenchman into the hut.

There they encountered an Indian woman, whose homely and almost repulsive features were revealed by the fire that blazed at one side of the room.

This woman was Arvan's wife. He had followed the example of many of his brother wood-hawks, and taken a wife from among the Sioux, whose lodges were not far away.

"Quick! put him down, and tell me if he will live!" cried Nina, grasping the arm of the old wood-hawk, who had halted in the middle of the room to permit his spouse to glare evilly at the young destroyer.

"Yes! yes!" was the reply, and Little Death-Step was laid on his back on the floor, while Arvan and Nina bent over him.

With intense curiosity, mingled with great impatience, the girl slayer watched the examination which the old wood-hawk instituted. He put his ear to the boy's breast, and with one hand at the wrist, listened. His bearded lips moved as if noting the pulsations of the heart.

Nina saw nothing but the old man whose verdict she dreaded, yet longed to hear. She saw not the evil eyes that glared at her from the head of Vipera, the wood-hawk's wife, nor did she catch a glimpse of the figure that suddenly appeared in the doorway and attracted the viper's notice.

It was the figure of a man dressed and painted as a Sioux Indian. His eyes flashed as he pointed to the girl.

Without an exchange of words with the new-comer, Vipera pounced down upon Nina like the eagle upon the lamb, and jerked her from the floor. Then she turned toward the door with her prey, and before the startled girl could comprehend her situation, she went spinning across the room to be caught by the Indian who leaped over the threshold for that purpose.

All this was the work of an instant.

In the twinkling of an eye the scarlet-faced fiend turned from the door—turned away even before old Arvan was aware of his presence, and vaulted into a saddle near at hand.

The wood-hawk, roused at last—when Nina had completely disappeared—looked up at Vipera.

"Where ga! go?" he asked.

There was no reply, but the vicious-looking Sioux squaw drew a murderous knife from her bosom, and fastened a pair of tigerish eyes on helpless Little Death-Step.

There was no mistaking that look; murder flashed from the depths of her eyes, till they startled even the old wood-hawk.

Suddenly, as if terrified by the vixen and her knife, he leaped to his feet and darted from the hut, leaving her complete mistress of the situation.

CHAPTER VI.

A SCENE AT PLOTTY.

"PLOTTY's at last! Wal, I'm lucky considerin' everything. How I got away from old Powder-Face

with my scalp, an' how I came up arter divin' spang under a log which fur awhile threatened to hold me under the water till doomsday! I'll strike the old chap fur hoss an' gun. He needn't try any of his innocent games on me, Kit Harefoot, fur I know the miserable skunk about as well as he knows himself. Yes, Pierre, I want hoss an' gun, an' I'm goin' to hev 'em."

The speaker, somewhat the worse for his meeting with Powder-Face and his demons, and a plunge beneath the muddy waters of the Missouri, was approaching the largest cabin to be found at the time of which we write in the river bottoms.

It was what would be termed double cabin, inasmuch as it was forty feet long and boasted of two apartments on the ground floor, if the low and dark garret overhead can be dubbed the second story.

Pierre Plotty, as his name indicates, was a Frenchman, and a retired wood-hawk. He kept what was called by his scattered neighbors "a store"; but his main stock in trade consisted of the meanest kind of whisky and a few guns, the latter obtained by means known to but few parties. He pronounced his name Plottry; but the Americans knew him as Plotty, an oily old rascal, who would not hesitate to downright lying in order to drive a coveted bargain.

He lived alone, eating and sleeping in the apartment which contained his "goods". The other room was looked upon with suspicion by the outside world, who had no liking for the old Frenchman. Some said that he kept horses in there with their feet muffled—horses stolen by his agents along the frontier; others said that it was a storage room for stolen guns and smuggled whisky, and that whenever any one entered the store-room, Pierre always placed himself between his customer and the door of that mysterious place.

In the light of morning old Plottry's cabin stood revealed to Wood-hawk Kit. It was situated at the foot of a gentle rise from whose summit a good view of the Missouri could be obtained.

The night of startling events had passed away. Kit was still on the Government trail which, passing by Plottry's hut, terminated at Yankton. The wood-hawk saw the necessity of faster locomotion to reach the train—of whose fate he was not yet aware—and for self-protection he must needs possess horse and gun. The latter he could get at Plottry's by purchase, and the former, Kit thought, and he smiled to himself, was not a thousand miles from the gun-rack.

The dog Mango trotted at Kit's heels, and, apparently unnoticed, the twain approached Plottry's.

An air of strange silence hung over the hut. Usually the door stood wide open; but now it was closed, and the heavy oak shutters, lined with several layers of sheet iron and about bullet proof, were tightly drawn.

"Oh, the old serpent is at home!" Wood-hawk Kit said with a light chuckle as he took in the sight of the closed structure. "He's an early riser, beats the birds up, an' war never known to be away from home!"

By this time the wood-hawk had reached the door, and the next moment his knock and voice dissipated the stillness.

"Ho! Pierre!" he called "Git out, you old rat, fur hyar's an ear ov corn wuth knowin'! Quick! Stir yer stumps, fur this mornin' Kit Harefoot's a customer what's goin' to trade if he's got to do it all himself."

For several moments no reply reached the wood-hawk's ears; and he repeated his knock with much vehemence.

"Oh, I've routed you out, eh?" Kit cried, hearing a lock turn on the inside of the door. "Good-mornin', Pierre! Got yer shanty shut up as if nobody war to home. Kinder queer! You don't often oversleep this way, I'm told."

Kit was talking to the broad-shouldered, dark-faced little man who stood in the doorway, and whose sinister eyes, snaky and restless, told that his visitor was any thing but welcome.

"I'm a customer this mornin'." Kit continued, stepping into the cabin before the Frenchman could reply. "Let me see yer guns."

At the prospect of a sale, Plottry's eyes gave an avaricious gleam, and he sprang behind the rough counter over which hung several second-hand rifles. Still he eyed his customer suspiciously, took into consideration the early visit, eyed Kit's wet clothes with no good conjectures, and wondered what had brought him to his store.

"I'll take this 'un." Kit said, setting a repeating rifle beside him. "How much did you say it's worth?"

"Thirty dollars."

"Ruther steep," was the response; "but you'll throw off a few if I buy one of your horses."

Plottry gave a violent start.

"I keeps no hosses," he said.

"Of course!" Kit said, bestowing a wink on the frontier miser which did not restore his composure.

"I know all about it, Pierre; hev ye got a fast beast this mornin'?"

But the man shook his head.

"No hosses to sell. Whisky an' guns, zat's all."

"All?" cried Kit. "I know better than that, old liar. You always keep horses, an' that beneath this very roof. An' jest how you git 'em the Lord knows. I want a hoss! Look hyar! if you war better acquainted with Kit Harefoot than your' war, you'd know that he gits every thing he goes arter, if it's gotable, an' the hoss is!"

With the last word on his lips Wood-hawk Kit brought his brawny fist down upon the counter by way of emphasis, and his furtive glance at the door which led into the forbidden room made Plottry gasp.

"I hev no hoss!" reiterated the frontier pest, stepping toward the door. "Pon my soul, Monsieur Harefoot!"

"Don't monsoor old Kit!" was the interruption. "Pretty words won't save the animile what is in thar!"

Kit's finger was pointing to the door and as he stepped toward it the scheming merchant uttered a short cry of despair and threw himself forward.

"I want the hoss! You've got no train to save: I hev! Open the door!"

But Plottry stood before the wood-hawk, a statue of indecision. He was unarmed; there was a knife in Kit's belt.

"Thar's nothin' in ze room but my whisky an' my guns," he began in a pleading tone.

"When did whisky an' guns begin to wear horse-shoes? Look at the marks on yer floor, you old sarpint!" thundered Kit, pointing to the unmistakable prints of cavalry shoes at his feet. "Come! no shammin'. Won't you open the door?"

"Ze hoss is gone; ze h—"

"Thar's one in thar now," broke in the wood-hawk, and the next instant he seized the Frenchman by the throat and hurled him aside.

"Now stay thar!" he cried, as Plottry, half-stunned by coming in contact with the un plastered wall, sunk to the floor. "If you git up, you'll find Mango at your throat. Watch 'im, dog, an' don't spare the old double-dealer if he tries to git up."

With a growl that made the Frenchman subside into silence, the gaunt dog sprung forward and began to guard the prisoner.

Kit turned his attention to the door. It was locked from the outside by a huge padlock, but Plottry, when demanded, sullenly threw the key at the wood-hawk, and the door yielded.

"I war right!" exclaimed the wood-hawk, catching a glimpse of a horse-tail as the door flew open, letting a flood of morning light into the dark room. "Thar's been a deal of truth told about this room, arter all, Pierre. Hosses? Why, it's a reg'lar stable!"

By this time, the speaker had advanced across the threshold. He was certainly among a number of horses, for his eyes, becoming accustomed to the gloom, were beginning to note their figures.

"Hyar's the one! No time to examine the critters. This 'un's saddled, ready fur the trip."

Kit sprung forward, and halted beside an iron-gray horse already saddled.

He laid his hand on the bridle and had turned the head of the unresisting animal to the door, when something fell upon him, and he felt a hand at his throat.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed, dropping the bridle, and striking the horse a blow which sent him into the room beyond where Mango was guarding the backwoods outlaw.

Then he grappled with the unknown adversary, and, after struggling for a moment, Kit was tripped without warning, and both went to the floor of the secret stable.

In the fall the grip on Kit's throat relaxed, and the wood-hawk succeeded in "turning his foe." Harefoot was a man of uncommon strength; he was quick, and a wrestler of no mean abilities, as many of his brother wood-hawks could testify. He called his knowledge of the art into play, and lifting his opponent, suddenly threw him to the hard floor, where he lay still, like one dead.

"Thunder an' guns! an Injun!" he exclaimed, seeing his foe lying in the light that came in at the partition door. "Pierre's doin' an honest bizness when he locks Injuns an' hosses up in his hut. Now—what! another? Ar' the shanty alive with 'em?"

Kit staggered toward the door before the new attack; but sent one Indian headlong into a stall with a blow with his fist.

"By the Big Muddy! I've struck old Powder-Face's head-quarters. Now, come on, one at a time, and we'll settle our accounts."

But the attack was not renewed. It was evident that Kit had invaded the hiding-place of a lot of thieving Indians, harbored by Pierre Plottry, who had often convinced the credulous Government that he was a law-abiding man. Kit gritted his teeth as he thought of this, and with an oath he closed the door, and before any hands from the inside could prevent, he locked it, and thrust the key into his capacious pocket.

"I'll tell the truth at Randall!" he said, turning upon the dog-guarded white-faced old Gaul who had not stirred from the spot where he had fallen. "You ought to be hosswhipped an' hanged. But never mind, I'll see that you don't lie through the next time. Come, Mango; we've got the hoss an' the gun; now fur bizness."

Picking up the repeating rifle, for which he had not paid a dollar, the fearless wood-hawk leaped across the threshold of the cabin closely followed by the dog.

Just beyond the door the horse, released from the secret stable, was trying to find a mouthful of succulent grass, and Kit was soon in the saddle.

"Bless me! if I didn't run into a reg'lar rendy-woo," ejaculated the wood-hawk. "Good-by, old Pierre! Mebbe I'll pay fur this gun; mebbe I won't," and a smile of merriment crossed the man's face, as he glanced at the magnificent rifle so lately obtained.

Thus equipped, Kit felt certain of warning the train, and reaching Fort Randall to startle the garrison with the announcement of old Powder-Face's return.

CHAPTER VII.
THE DEEDS OF A PYTHONESS.

"KNIFE sharp an' knife long! It go clean through white boy's heart, an' he never shoot any more."

In the light of the fire that illuminated the wood-hawk's cabin, the squaw wife stood over Little Death-Step, the long-bladed knife in her bony hand, and her eyes full of murder.

As we have seen, her husband had fled and left her alone—to slay the hunter of Powder-Face and his demons, thus unexpectedly thrown into her power. With the nature of the pythonesse fully aroused, she dropped beside the young destroyer. Her eager hand tore aside his hunting-frock, exposing the fair breast, white and shining beneath the knife.

He was not dead; some unseen fingers had slipped the demon's rope from the fatal point beneath the ear, and insensibility, and not death, had followed the drawing up.

Lee Wolfe would live; if not stricken by the Sioux squaw's knife, he might live to carry out his vow against Powder-Face and his band of cut-throats.

While the viper stooped over the boy without one gleam of mercy in her snaky eyes, Little Death-Step's lids slowly unclosed. At first the orbs saw nothing; but suddenly the youth tried to shrink from the apparition, as if all at once it had burst upon his vision, or was the nightmare of some hideous dream.

But the talons of Vipera clutched his throat and held him down.

"Money in boy, mebbe!" she said. "Powder-Face want 'im, an' will give yellow money for 'im, p'raps."

Even that wild woman of the West—that squaw-wife, whose hand had perhaps taken life before, coveted the "root of all evil"—gold.

She put the knife into the girdle at her waist. A new light had suddenly taken possession of her eyes: avarice, and not murder, filled them now.

She left Death-Step on the floor, and sprung to the door. For a moment she leaned out, and looked cautiously on every side, but saw nothing. Then she turned into the hut again, closing the portal, and throwing herself down beside our hero, began to bind his limbs with a strong cord which she produced from her bosom.

Of course Little Death-Step made no resistance, and after a few minutes the task was finished.

Eagerly snatching her victim up, the pythonesse bounded to a ladder which led to a dark opening among the smoky planks overhead, and went up the rounds. Dark as an oubliette was the close apartment into which the opening led; it was hot and almost unbearable as it was close to the roof, and there were few avenues of ventilation.

But Vipera found her way to a cot of skins, which emitted an offensive odor.

Upon this she deposited her burden with a light but devilish laugh, immediately followed by an observation which was not calculated to put Death-Step in a hopeful mood, and he was left alone.

Conscious now to a painful degree, the youthful slayer fully realized his situation. But he could not imagine how he had come to old Arvan's cabin—how he had fallen into the clutches of that demoness, who was known far and wide as a very fiend. Of course he knew nothing of Nina's rescue of him from the fatal tree before Wood-hawk Kit's cabin, nor of the girl's abduction by the Indian from the Frenchman's hovel.

His limbs were full of pain, his head seemed ready to fly asunder, and his throat, parched and dry, gave him great trouble. There were bonds on his wrists, on his feet—bonds drawn by hands that knew no mercy.

Almost suffocated by the heat of the dark loft, Little Death-Step gasped for breath. For many minutes he looked for an opening in vain; but at last a streak of light greeted his searching eyes and he rolled joyously toward it. With a cry of delight which he could not have suppressed on pain of death, he put his lips to the narrow aperture which was near the eave, and drank in the breathes of cool air which came in upon him.

"I'll pay the viper for all this!" he cried, for he had not begun to despair despite his seemingly hopeless situation. "And there are others who will feel the vengeance of Lee Wolfe. Ay, when I get out of this, blood will flow like water in these bottom lands!"

Through the crevice Little Death-Step watched the night give place to rosy-cheeked dawn, and the winds that came to fan him now were freshened with dew, and almost laden with freedom. He felt his strength return under their influence, and now and then, when he forgot his position, he tried to rise only to sink back and grind his teeth with rage.

During the day which followed, the squaw vixen brought him a mug of water and some venison poorly cooked, but sweeter than honey to the captive of the garret.

"White boy hungry?" said Vipera, amused at the rapacity exhibited by our hero. "He eat much to make him strong so he kin git away—hey?"

"I'd have to eat a great deal before I could break such ropes as these," the urchin said with a smile. "You tie for keeps, old woman."

He saw the snaky eyes glisten with barbarous triumph.

"Good tie! keep till Powder-Face comes!"

Did Little Death-Step start? If he did, the reader will forgive him.

Powder-Face! there was something appalling in that hideous name. What! was he to fall into the hands of that merciless frontier scourge again? The thought was any thing but pleasant.

"Is he coming for me?" asked the boy, looking up into Vipera's face.

"Him come to-night an' take white boy away."

"Then you are in league with him? We'll know all our foes before long."

"Good many now, eh?" the pythoness said, fiendishly.

Little Death-Step did not reply; but relapsed into a silence which drove the vixen and the remains of the beast below.

"To-night I am to be delivered into the hands of that frontier devil!" the destroyer said, grating his teeth. "Where is Nina?—Kit? Oh, he's going to save the train. To save it? No! to find them all butchered. Vengeance for last night's work! that is the sweetest word I can pronounce. *Vengeance!* I like to repeat it!"

And Death-Step turned to the streak of light and felt the afternoon breeze, warm and pleasant, on his face.

He lay there and thought—of the approaching night, perhaps.

The moon was up again, high in the autumn sky, and the trees that surrounded Jean Arvan's hut were gently dropping their leaves of russet and gold upon the forest aisles.

A company of horsemen approaching from the mouth of the little tributary near which the wood-hawk's cabin stood, at last drew rein before the inviting door.

Their dress proclaimed them Indians, and they were the roughest looking red-skins ever seen in that country. Brawny and half-naked fellows without a single exception, they looked like border vagabonds. They were well armed, each carrying a new repeating rifle across the saddle-bow.

"Here, my sister!" cried the leader of the crowd, a stalwart, powder-burned ruffian, as he sprung from his steed, and with a single bound landed in the middle of Arvan's apartment. "Open your meat-house, and while we eat, tell us the news. Quick! we have no time to stay. That's only fourteen of us now; an' one hasn't been seen since last night. Has he been here—Devil Dick?"

Vipera's eyes scintillated at the mention of the outlaw's name; but she did not answer Powder-Face.

"Meat my brother shall have," she said. "Will all come in?"

"Yes!" and Powder-Face called his demons into the hut.

Clamorous for food, the scourges of the frontier rushed pell-mell into the room while Vipera sliced steaks from a huge haunch of roasted venison.

All at once she turned upon Powder-Face and grasped his arm. Her eyes fairly glittered now.

"My brother any gold?" she asked.

"Gold! still after the yellow rocks? Why, you'd kill old Jean for a couple ounces. No, I have none!"

"Then Powder-Face cannot have boy."

A wonderful change instantly came to the villain's countenance. He caught the wood-hawk's squaw-wife, and pulled her to one side of the room.

"The boy! the boy!" he cried. "What has become of the eagle-headed slayer whom we hung last night? Did you come along an' cut 'im down? You're roamin' about half the night. Say, whar is Death-Step?"

"Vipera knows."

"The mischief you do."

"Now, has my brother got gold?"

"Yes, plenty of it. Alive or dead?"

"Safe! strong; good enough to hang ag'in. Hal ha! hal!"

"Ah! you cut 'im down after the bullets from the moon?"

"No."

"Well, never mind, then. Whar is he?"

"How much gold?"

Powder-Face thrust his hand into one of his pockets and drew it up full of shining eagles.

Vipera darted upon them with the miser's scream of delight.

"All? all?"

"Yes, an' more, too, for Death-Step."

Without ceremony the coin was emptied into the squaw's hands, and burying it beneath the garment that covered her bosom, she sprung to the ladder.

With the agility of a person far beneath her years, she went up the rounds and disappeared beyond the opening.

"Stop eatin' an' watch that hole!" said Powder-Face to his companions, as he pointed to the trap, with a face ablaze with new triumph. "We did a poor job of hangin' last night, Demons. By my hopes of life! we'll not fail now."

In silence for a moment the Demons watched the opening, when a cry, burdened with disappointment, fell upon their ears.

"Go away, I fear!" Powder-Face gasped, springing to the foot of the ladder.

But he halted there, for Vipera's face, almost devoid of color, was looking down upon him.

"White boy gone!" the pythoness hissed. "Got clean off!"

"Flints and ramrods! Jist as I expected!" flashed Powder-Face. "Come down, an' we'll hang you, double-faced serpent!"

There was no reply, but the next instant the report of a rifle without was heard, and one of the Indians staggered against the ladder in his death-agony, forcing it from its position, and hurling it with almost crashing force upon his companions' heads.

Confusion followed the fatal shot. Powder-Face, with ready rifle, leaped to the door to hear the clear tones of the slayer:

"You shall be the last one, fiend! The eagle's head shall look down upon you in the death-agony!"

He started back with an oath.

"Demons, to saddle!" he cried. "Leave Vipera to care for Cloven Nose; he is death-struck, and Death-Step is still alive!"

A yell greeted Powder-Face's words, and there was mounting in hot haste.

CHAPTER VIII. STARTLING WORDS.

"THAR! some ov 'em wouldn't b'lieve me, cap'n! Now, come up hyar an' look fur yerselves. I tol' ye that a Demon nailed a piece ov paper to my door, an' that while I war readin' it, that wild boy come up an' druv his knife clean through it an' left it stickin' thar! Thar's the kinfe jist whar I left it, though it ain't b'leedin' now."

The speaker was Wood-hawk Kit, and he sat astride of the horse which we have seen him take from Pierre Plotty's ranch. His face was turned to a group of United States cavalry, and his outstretched hand almost touched the knife still sticking in his cabin door.

The wood-hawk's eyes were full of victory. After his adventure at Plotty's store he had reached Fort Randall without accident, though not without incident.

During his journey he came suddenly upon a scene that filled his heart with horror, and roused his intense indignation. This was the sight of the butchered train, the shocking *debris* of which lay in the Government trail. Everywhere lay the bodies of the fallen, horses and the carcasses of the horses, for Powder-Face had not spared the dumb brutes.

From the terrible sight which had come unexpectedly upon his vision, Kit might easily believe that no one had escaped. He knew the merciless disposition of the scourges who had come back to make the trail one of death again, and to rob the wood-hawk of his little all, to waylay Government troops in short, to make the lovely Missouri bottoms lands of death.

Swearing that the perpetrators of that deed ofabolism should pay dearly for their devilish act, Kit turned away, and once more urged his horse toward the fort. Thank fortune! the remainder of the ride was not interrupted by such scenes, and Kit was soon closeted with the commandant behind the strong stockades.

The wood-hawk's presence before his lonely cabin eight days after his departure, told the result of his errand to the fort. A company of cavalry, strong enough to cope with Powder-Face and his Demons, if they would offer fair battle, had been dispatched into the troubled territory, and Kit had returned in the double capacity of guide and avenger.

The company had buried the dead of the ill-fated train, and visited Plotty's ranch. They found, and not to their surprise either, the hut deserted. Fearful of the consequences which threatened to follow Harefoot's discovery, the wily Frenchman had taken his departure; but had left behind traces of double-dealing which aroused the commandant of the troop and made him eager to lay violent hands on the old scamp.

"That knife war bleedin' when I left hyar," Kit continued, addressing the soldiers, who were gazing with wonder on the blade whose singular and ghostly history the wood-hawk had related to them during the ride thither. "Now, cap'n, thar's no mistake about it," reiterated the westerner. "My old hut's intact, which fact is strange, considerin' how Powder-Face hates me."

"Why, there's a rope hanging over that limb. Pears to me that somebody's been having a hangin' spree while you've been gone."

The soldier's words were addressed to the wood-hawk, who quickly saw the rope which hung from the limb not far away.

Instantly the newly-discovered object came in for a full share of attention, and the troopers clustered about it.

"Thar war a hangin', that's certain," said Wood-hawk Kit; "but the body war cut down. Powder-Face hev been hyar. Now, who did he hang? Thet's the question afore the house."

A silence fell over the company, and the wood-hawk and the captain exchanged looks.

"The boy, perhaps," Captain Dingley said, scarcely above a whisper.

"What the chap what druv that knife into my door, an' dared me to pull it out? Not a bit ov it. He warn't born to be hung by such a passel ov cut-throats. No sirree."

"Who, then, did they hang?" asked Dingley, not a little chagrined.

"That's a question," answered Kit. "The person what was hung isn't dead."

"Why not?"

"Because he would be hanging thar yit. They don't cut dead people down in these parts, an' Powder-Face doesn't cut 'em down at any time. Yes, cap'n, the neck what war encircled by that rope is warm yit, unless death has chilled it on some other casion."

Kit turned from Captain Dingley and fixed his eyes in a thoughtful mood upon the rope.

Despite the shadows which had followed the departure of day, the fatal cord was plainly visible. But the bear and the savages which had fallen beneath it were gone.

The spectators now before the cabin knew nothing of this; they saw only the nooseless cord hanging from the limb up to which Little Death-Step had been pulled by the Demons.

"Wal, thar's nuthin' hyar," the wood-hawk said, turning reluctantly away. "We might as well go on to Perdy's Bend. My carpets and my marble-topped furniture hev'n't been teched since I went away," and the wood-hawk executed a grin which diverted all who saw.

"To Perdy's Bend it is," Dingley said. "As I remarked awhile back, we will certainly come upon these ruffians. This time no blizzard shall save Powder-Face."

The cavalry captain gathered up his reins, and the example was instantly followed by his subordinates. A minute later the horses were headed for the south,

and the command to march was trembling on Dingley's tongue, when a voice came from the high land toward the river.

"Stand still, blue-coats, or be bored with leaden balls!"

The voice was clear, distinct and merciless.

The men exchanged looks of amazement, not altogether unmixed with terror, for white faces were seen among their numbers.

Dingley himself did not look greatly composed; but he found voice enough to answer the unseen speaker.

"We have halted," he said. "By what authority do you command thus?"

"By that authority which knows no law!" was the answer, coming from the same place from whence the startling command had issued. "You are standing before thirty rifles; there are but twenty-six of you. We see you plainly!"

"That ar' a lie!" whispered Wood-hawk Kit at Dingley's elbow. "I hev stood up thar at this hour an' can't even see my shanty. It's a gammon game, an' a thin one at that."

"But they may be nearer than they seem," suggested the captain, whose voice told that he was far from feeling at his ease.

"They're up on the hill!" said Kit, "an' thar ain't thirty, either. Hyar, hold my hoss; I'll reconnoiter."

Tossing his reins upon Dingley's arm, Wood-hawk Kit dropped noiselessly from the saddle and almost instantly disappeared.

"What are you going to do?" came an impatient voice from the high ground. "Thirty fingers are playin' uncommon recklessly with that many triggers."

"Who are you?" Dingley asked.

"Powder-Face and his Demons!"

This answer drew exclamations of fear from the soldiers. The idea of sitting in their saddles before an unseen and merciless foe, was not of the most pleasant kind. Murmurs of cowardice, suggestions of unceremonious flight, accompanied by not a few uncomplimentary but whispered remarks about their leader, now arose on every side.

Dingley was confused. He believed, despite Kit's assurance to the contrary, that he and his squadron presented a fair target for the Demons, and he wondered where the wood-hawk was.

"You're a long time answering a simple question!" suddenly broke in upon Dingley's silence, and then came other words in a lower and sterner tone, evidently addressed to some persons near the hidden speaker:

"Boys—Demons, cover your men; ready!"

The command seemed the prelude to death. Its effect was marvelous.

Dingley's men scattered like sheep; they drove their spurs deep into the rowels of their steeds, and fled, helter-skelter, for their lives. The valiant captain, "borne from the field in the panic," as he would have stated in an official report, fled as rapidly as the rest, and the sound of hoofs shook the air.

But instead of a volley from the high ground, there rung out loud and clear, the clear barytone voice of a boy, in the heartiest of laughs.

"Hew! run like deers, you valiant hunters of Powder-Face!" cried the laugher. "I must say, Captain Dingley, that you command a gallant band. I ought to report you at Fort Randall!"

"Not fur the world, youngster! The boys are brave at heart; but they thought they war in a predicament, an' saw no other way out."

"Oh, it's you, eh!" cried the laughing boy, as he turned upon tall Kit Harefoot standing near him, with a look of surprise on his dark face. "Well, sir, I'm glad to see you back. Ah! you've seen me before."

"Of course I hev!" said Wood-hawk Kit, extending a brawny hand, which the boy sprung forward and took with eagerness. "Thar's yer knife yit, little one, still stickin' in old Kit's door."

"It's a pity it isn't in the hearts of some men in these parts!" said the youth, a flash of vengeance in his handsome eyes.

"Powder-Face an' them 'ens!"

"Yes; but there is a man who outranks them all."

"What a bigger fiend than Old Powder Face?" almost gasped Kit, opening his eyes in astonishment. "If that's a conundrum, boy, I guv it up to one't, fur I've out guv Powder-Face the credit of bein' the biggest one'v our' ground!"

"There is his equal, if not his superior, in this country."

"Who is he?"

"Devil Dick."

"The hound what wrote that dockument on my door?"

"He's the man! He wanted to tie an eight-hundred-pound bear to my legs after Powder-Face had strung me up. What makes you start and grit your teeth?"

"I know 'im," said the wood-hawk, significantly, and Little Death-Step saw the long fingers gripe the gun-barrel spasmodically. "We used to be—friends."

"You are not that now, Kit?"

"Not by a long-shot!" said the wood-hawk, firmly.

"You wouldn't stand here a minute if I told you a certain thing."

Kit Harefoot started, and, letting his rifle drop to the ground, seized the boy-slayer with both hands.

"Tell me!" he demanded, his eyes full of uncurbed eagerness. "It ar' suthin' about Nina! I know it! Tell me, boy, or I'll furgit that I'm a man, an' fling ye ag'in the tree!"

The boy was suddenly jerked from the ground, and held in mid-air for a moment; then he was brought violently back to earth by the wood-hawk's powerful strength.

"Out with it! I know it's bad, but I want to hear it."

"Here it is: eight days ago Devil Dick took Nina from the old Frenchman's house, down at the mouth of Smoky Tongue, and I haven't seen her since."

The intelligence seemed to strike Wood-hawk Kit dumb.

His hands instantly left the boy's person, and he started back.

"Mango, do you hear it?" he cried, at length, addressing the canine companion of his forest life. "Devil Dick hez captured Nina!"

The next moment the wood-hawk sprung upon his rifle, and seized it with a cry of fiendish delight.

"No rest to old Kit's feet till he deals with Dick!" he cried. "I'm goin' to wade through blood to that gal, I am! Stars an' dev'rs! I'd ruther see her dead than in his hands!"

Little Death-Step gazed with astonishment upon the madman who stood before him.

Was this the easy-going wood-chopper of the bottom lands—the good-natured man, whom the heartless contractors could cheat with impunity? Ay! it was Kit Harefoot!

"I'll help you, Kit!" the boy cried, extending his hand.

"Your work will avail you nothing for I have united my fortunes with those of Devil Dick!"

The two auditors sprung back, as if a thunderbolt had dropped at their feet.

"Great Jehovah! it war the gal's voice!" cried the wood-hawk, staring in the direction from which the startling words had come.

As for the boy, he said nothing.

His face was white as a pall; he trembled from head to foot, and the repeating-rifle, which fell from his nerveless hands, told that he was too horrified to speak.

Had Nina, his preserver, his more than friend, united her fortunes to those of that hunted, hated outlaw of Dakota?

We shall see!

CHAPTER IX.

THE DOUBLE-DEALER'S FATE.

SOME time elapsed before either spoke again.

All at once there came from the darkness into which they were staring with the hopes of seeing the speaker whose words had so violently startled them, the rapid galloping of a horse.

It was going away as the sounds told; having delivered her message, Nina was leaving without one word of explanation—leaving her auditors dumb with amazement. The sounds of hoofs had almost died away entirely before a human voice broke the silence.

"I swan to gracious! it beats my time all holler!" suddenly broke forth Wood-hawk Kit. "Thet the gal should jine her fortunes to Devil Dick's is beyond comprehension. What hev you to say about it, little one? Hey you turned into a statoo or stum? Hyer! wake up an' give us a bit ov yer opinion."

It took the rough shake which Kit Harefoot administered to our hero to rouse him from the strange lethargy, if we may thus speak, into which he had fallen.

"I don't know what to think, Kit," he said. "But I can't believe it!"

"Thet's b'ness!" ejaculated the wood-hawk. "When I hear of the dove goin' snooks with the hawk, I'll lean to'ard the idea an' not one minute afore! It ain't reasonable, boy! Why, I hev known the gal fur nigh onto two year, an' it isn't her natur to gal up with such a fellar as Devil Dick. He's one of Powder-Face's gang, an' she never had a bit ov love for the hull kit an' passel ov 'em."

The speaker's words had a good effect on Death-Step, and he put forth his hand with a smile. Wood-hawk Kit grasped it, and shook it heartily after his manner.

"Kit," said the boy, "what do you know about that girl?"

"Not much," was the response, and the look which the speaker gave the questioner told that he was surprised. "It ar' a queer question, boy, fur you've known her, too, I s'pect?"

"That is true, but she would never tell me any thing about her life. I came into this country nearly two years ago. Our train was attacked by Powder-Face and his Demons, and I believe that all were butchered, save myself."

"Jest like they served the train I went to save—the dogs!" said Kit, shutting his teeth hard.

"Did they butcher all?"

"Every one!"

Little Death-Step stooped and picked up his gun.

"Kit, I've seen stirring times since I sent you to Fort Randall."

"Oh, it war you!" exclaimed the wood-hawk. "Whar's the eagle-head what Mango an' I see'd the night?"

"It is safe," Death-Step answered, with a smile. "But let us not talk of it. Since you left I have fought bears, Indians, ropes and serpents. Powder-Face hanged me before your cabin, but Nina cut me down. I war carried to old Arvan's cabin."

"What you fell into the clutches of Vipera!" interrupted the wood-hawk.

"Yes, and there Devil Dick suddenly appeared while I was yet unconscious, and carried the girl away. Vipera bound me, hand and foot, and put me away in the loathsome garret of her den to save me for Powder-Face; but I managed to loosen my bonds by rolling accidentally upon an old cavalry sword. Then I easily escaped through the roof, just as Powder-Face and his Demons rode up to the hut. They all rushed in, clamorous for something to eat, leaving their horses at the door. I saw my chance, slipped around the house, stole a steed and repeater, and had the satisfaction of stretching one of my old foes dead on Vipera's floor!"

"Good!" cried Kit. "Sech shootin' ez you hev done in these parts a'n't to be laughed at."

"Not by Powder-Face and his demons, at least!" replied Death-Step, with a smile. "Since that time," he continued, seriously, "I have tried to find Dick and his captive, but in vain."

"Can't you find the trail?" asked Kit, in amazement.

"I cannot find it; but we are near it now."

"It is out that!" the wood-hawk said, pointing to the left. "We will not give it up till we find them."

"That is the doctrine!" cried Death-Step, enthusiastically. "Do you know when my work ends?"

"Not exactly, boy."

"When the last Demon lies on the ground with a white face turned up to the stars—not until then! But, Kit, let us go back to Nina. Did she never tell you anything about her life?"

"Nuthin'. She's a queer 'un. She knocked at my door one night when I war dressin' Mango's wound, and old Powder-Face hed caught the gal, an' come nigh wastin' her erlive. I say, she come to my hut, nearly giv' out, poor thing! I took her in, an' she didn't leave fur three weeks. She made me teach her how to shoot, an' afore I could reach the last lesson, she could shoot better'n her teacher. She used to say that she was goin' to shoot big game. After awhile she left my hut, but I would see her off an' on. Sometimes I'd find a fawn at my cabin door, dead of course; but I knew who put it there!"

The wood-hawk paused as if he had finished his narrative.

"This is all you know, Kit?" asked the youth, with an air of disappointment.

"It's about all," was the response. "It seems to me that we're standin' hyar a long time fur nuthin'!"

"That is true. I have been forgetting my duty," said Death-Step. "I wonder where the soldiers are?"

"Oh, a good way off," Kit said, with a chuckle of merriment, as he recalled the ludicrous flight of Captain Dingley and his squad. "They war headed to 'ards Sully. What did you do the fur, boy?"

"Just to try the mettle of the men sent out by the United States Government to hunt Powder-Face and his Demons. What kind of a man is this Dingley?"

"A brave fellar when he hez a fair show," said Kit; "but the way you struck 'im, my leetle cap'n, war enough to frighten the narviest of the blue-coated boys."

"Dingley's mettle will be tried before he's through with Powder-Face and his Demons; mark my words," was Death-Step's reply. "Did your horse go off in the panic?"

"Of course he did; but that's no harm in lookin'," said Kit, and leaving our hero's side he crept down to his hut.

After his departure Little Death-Step glided to one side, and grasped the rein of a horse which stood statue-like in the shadows.

Vaulting into the saddle with practiced ease, he waited for the wood-hawk's reappearance.

Presently the gaunt form of Kit rose, as it were, from the ground at his feet, and the first intimation the youth had of his proximity was the fall of his hand on his knee.

"Kit, how on earth—"

"Hist! not a word," came the interruption in low, admonishing tones, as the wood-hawk rose to his true height beside the horse. "Set yer eyes to'ards the river whar the moon is comin' up."

The boy obeyed this strangely-expressed injunction, cocking the repeating rifle as he did so, and silence fell around the twain.

Over the rim of the high bank of the Missouri, the brilliant orb of night was peeping in her rounded beauty. The river was not far away; the swash of its muddy waves could be distinctly heard by any who listened for the sounds; but Lee Wolfe and the wood-hawk were looking, not listening.

Suddenly a dark object appeared against the disk of the moon like a figure on the magic lantern's circle on the wall, but it passed away to be succeeded by another and another, until the presence of a procession could not be doubted.

The two spectators watched without uttering a word. Their curiosity was centered upon the figures which appeared to ride across the lunar country, like some brigands of the mountains of the moon.

"Speerts!" whispered Wood-hawk Kit to himself, as he gazed with eyes almost starting from their sockets. "Thar's no use in talkin'! I've tried to argy the thing down; but thar'r speerts in these parts. Who ever seen Injuns in the moon afore? Whar's the man what—"

The wood-hawk's question, relative to the aforementioned "speerts," no doubt, was broken by the report of a rifle, and with a cry which came down to earth with wonderful human distinctness one of the ghosts in the moon threw up its arms and fell out of sight.

The very stillness of death followed this unexpected tragedy. Like magic the figures vanished, and the disk of the nocturnal planet was undisturbed by specters of any kind.

But the two speechless spectators heard the rapid gallop of horses.

"Come!" cried Death-Step, starting forward; "I'm going to see the fellow who got his everlasting."

Wood-hawk Kit stared at the boy in amazement for a moment; but, with some incoherent remarks about "speerts" on his lips, followed, without an effort to detain him.

Little Death-Step pressed forward boldly, but not without caution; he held the cocked rifle ready for an emergency.

The river-bank, as I have said, was not far away.

The ground rose gradually till the summit was reached. The moonlight fell uninterrupted upon ground and foliage here, and the young slayer came suddenly upon an object lying in the short grass.

Instantly he sprung from his horse and stooped over the body, for body it was.

"What hev you found?" said Kit, curiously, coming up at that moment.

"Look!" answered Death-Step, pointing to the figure on the ground. "There's one man less for Uncle Sam to hang. The double-dealer has smugged his last whisky and guns."

"Great Caesar's ghost!" cried Wood-hawk Kit, recognizing the dark face that pressed the autumn-tinted grasses to the ground. "Pierre Plotty hez gone to his account. I wonder who did this?"

"That is what I would like to know," answered the boy.

CHAPTER X.

VIPERA SHOWS HER TEETH.

WHILE Little Death-Step and his companion were gazing into the deathly face of Pierre Plotty, the double-dealer of the West, who had met his doom at the hands of some secret foe, a thrilling scene was being enacted not far away, and to this we propose to convey the reader.

The home of Vipera, the Indian wife of the wood-hawk, Jean Arvan, has been already visited by the reader in the course of this narrative. We now return to it.

It was not long after nightfall that a man, well-mounted and armed, halted before the hut, and boldly pushed his way across the threshold. He found the room untenanted, though a log fire, burning on the clayey hearth, told that it had lately been inhabited.

The new-comer was a dark-faced, but unusually handsome man. He was tall and straight like a Sioux Indian, possessed of great strength, and still comparatively young in life. He wore a new hunting-suit, over the shoulders of which hung a cape with a pretty fringe; but across the top of his forehead was a dark streak, which seemed to be the remains of some disguise. With little labor, this personage could be transformed into a Sioux warrior.

A shadow of disappointment crossed his face when he found the hut without a tenant, and he uttered words which betokened impatience and ire.

"The old night-owl is out again, neglecting her interest and mine!" he said, in the worst of humor. "By Jove! I'll cease to trust her, pretty soon. A bad life makes bad friends; ha! ha! I talk as if I was leading a bad life. I wish the old vixen had a looking-glass. I'd like to see myself just now with the Injun paint off my face; and with the new duds on."

The speaker sent a glance around the room as if searching for the mirror, a thing which Vipera had no use for.

"Well! well!" he cried, starting back for the squaw wife stood in the doorway, her dark eyes scintillating like the basilisk's, and her hands clenched as if they itched to drive the intruder from her domicile.

"Oh, it's me!" the man said with a light laugh stepping forward and extending his hands. "You don't seem to know me since I've washed my face and turned white man again."

Vipera shook her head and continued to survey the speaker from head to foot.

"Come up and look right into my eyes," continued the brigandish-looking fellow. "When you dung the girl at me and saw me catch her so easily, I was a Sioux; but now I'm white."

A strange cry, indicative of recognition, now fell from the hag's lips and she crept forward with the silken tread of the tigress.

The man felt uneasy in her presence; there was a baleful light in her little eyes, and her bony fingers twitched nervously.

"Devil Dick!" she said, in a whisper, which seemed a veritable hiss of some deadly serpent.

"Devil Dick it is!" was the reply. "You see, Vipera, I've put away my Injun garments, and have turned white man."

"Vipera see. But what Devil Dick want here?"

"In the first place, I want to know if you have seen anything of Powder-Face within the last few days?"

"Dick no see his brother, then?"

"No! nor do I want to," snapped the outlaw.

"Mad!"

"Not exactly," was the reply. "I can't have too many iron in the fire at once, too. I'm going to leave this country—going away to the land of the Yellowstone."

"With white girl?"

"Certainly! you do not think, Vipera, that I'd leave such a prize as that behind?"

There was no reply to the outlaw's question. The snake-eyed woman stood before him, her skinny hands clenched until the nails were lost in the palms, and her deep-set eyes glowing like coals of fire.

Dick involuntarily retreated. He looked with fear upon the hideous creature whom he could liken to nothing human.

"Where white gal now?" asked the squaw.

"That's what I'd like to know. Mebbe you could tell me, you are about so much."

His words for a moment nonplussed the termagant.

"Devil Dick knows," she cried, suddenly. "Vipera throw her into his hands when he was painted like an Injun, an' he carry her off. What did he give Vipera for this? Where are the yellow rocks he promised her?"

"You shall have them!"

"When?"

"Soon. But let us go back to my first question."

The girl is not worth quarreling about. Where is Powder-Face?"

The hag's reply was a devilish laugh, which displayed her yellow teeth, broken and horrid.

"Well, if you are going to be stubborn and not answer, you may whistle for your gold; that's all!" flashed the outlaw. "We need not talk longer. I came here to get a little information, and to treat you decently. You know where Powder-Face is at this moment. Keep your secret to yourself, but rue your meanness before the daylight comes."

The flashing of Devil Dick's eyes told that anger was getting the best of him.

As the last word fell from his lips, he strode forward, and with a cruel sweep of his right arm sent the tigress spinning across the room.

"Take that, and learn to treat a visitor with some respect!" he hissed as he dealt the blow, if the push can thus be called. "We'll meet again, my woodcat, and then I'll clip your claws and put an end to your usefulness."

Vipera reeled from the Demon with a half-human cry. Stumbling over a stick of wood she narrowly avoided the fire, and landed in one corner of the hut among several guns.

A smile curled Devil Dick's handsome lips as the pythons went down; but the next moment every vestige of color left his face.

The Sioux squaw bounded to her feet with the alertness of a rubber ball, and the man found her confronting him with a rifle leveled at his breast.

The tables had been turned in the twinkling of an eye; the Dakota outlaw was at the mercy of the woman over whom he had just triumphed.

"What will Devil Dick give for his life now?" were the words that seemed to flash over the barrel. "Ha! ha! he pushed Vipera toward the fire, but she fell among the guns. What Dick give? Let him say quick!"

A minute elapsed before the Demon found his tongue. Defiant a moment since, he must now act the rôle of the suppliant—must prostrate himself, perhaps, before the ugliest woman west of the Mississippi, and beg like a child for his life.

"Kill me, Vipera, and not one yellow stone will ever shine in your hands!" he said, striking at once at her inordinate lust for gold. "Powder-Face will give you nothing; he gave nothing for the boy. Keep me and I will load you down with the bright pebbles—the white man's money. Lower the gun and let us talk about it."

But the deadly rifle did not fall an inch, and Devil Dick angrily bit his lip.

"You will shoot me and lose the gold," he said, continuing. "We ought to be friends, not enemies. What does that mean?"

Despite his situation, the outlaw turned to the door, and the tigress heard, too, the unmistakable sounds of hoofs.

"Powder-Face!" exclaimed Dick, under his breath. "The old fiend must not find me here."

He looked at Vipera. With a startled and puzzled look, the Sioux woman was listening to the galloping horses. Mingled with the sound was the jingle of metal.

Devil Dick heard this and turned upon the vixen.

"Soldiers!" he cried. "The blue-coats are upon us. They know all about you helping Powder-Face. Quick! hide every gun you have. Fling them into the well under the floor."

The squaw stood in the middle of the room struck dumb with fear. The rifle seemed ready to fall from her hands. The United States soldiers were the last persons Vipera wanted to meet.

Devil Dick sprang to the door and flung it open; but before he could leap across the threshold a voice commanded him to halt, and he saw a dozen blue-coated cavalrymen draw rein before the forest den.

"Good luck, my fellows!" he instantly called out to the troopers. "In there is a woman who can tell you where Powder-Face is at this moment. If you want her you must be quick. I'll shut off her escape from the rear window."

With the last word still quivering his lips, Devil Dick darted around the house while Captain Dingley and several of his band threw themselves from the saddles, and sprung over the threshold.

The Dakota outlaw did not pause when he reached the rear of the wood-hawk's hut, but took to his heels, and quickly disappeared.

"There's more than one way of outwitting Uncle Sam's blue-coats!" he said to himself, with a laugh. "Their leader was Dingley—Horatio Dingley, who would give his right hand for the chance of putting me up."

At that moment the half-muffled report of a fire-arm fell upon the fugitive's ears.

"The tigress is fighting!" he said.

It was even so, for Vipera, the squaw wife, had sent a bullet crashing through the brain of one of Dingley's men.

CHAPTER XI.

FRIENDLESS AND HUNTED.

TRAILING his gun at his side, Devil Dick kept on through the wood, at each step increasing the distance between himself and the United States regulars. He had no desire to fall into the hands of Horatio Dingley, a man who hated him for strong private reasons.

Keeping up his flight, he soon passed beyond ear shot of the brief struggle which followed the trooper's entrance of Vipera's den. He did not witness the desperation with which the mad woman combatted the soldiers, until, by a charge in a body, she was secured and thrown bound into one corner, while the hut was ransacked without ceremony and no mercy.

Exasperated by the death of their comrade, Ding-

ley's men would have made short work of Vipera if their leader had not interfered. He leaped forward at the critical moment, and, pushing half a dozen revolvers aside, saved the squaw's life.

Such scenes as these escaped Devil Dick's vision, as he hastened from the spot where they were occurring. He heard not the loud curses which fell from the soldier's lips, when he learned from the lips of their prisoner the identity of the rogue who had eluded them.

After an hour's rapid flight, the Dakota outlaw came almost suddenly upon a hut which stood in the middle of a dense tract of timber. His joy at holding the structure told that he had aimed to reach it.

"Now for a little love scene," he said, with a light chuckle, as he stopped to arrange his cape which a hundred limbs had brushed away. "A fellow does not feel like making love after escaping from bullet and noose; but I can do nothing else when in her presence."

He soon stood before the low-browed door of the hut, and knocked three times—a preconcerted signal.

But no reply came.

Muttering something which sounded like a volley of oaths, the outlaw pushed on the door which immediately swung open, and he entered a place of Stygian gloom.

The very silence seemed palpable; but the crack of a lucifer dissipated it, and a flash of light revealed Devil Dick's surroundings.

Almost immediately following the birth of the light came a cry of horror from the Demon's throat, and he staggered toward the threshold.

Stretched upon the floor lay the body of a man, whose face, dark and full of evil lines, was repulsive. His position told the outlaw that he was dead.

"Gone!" hissed Devil Dick; "the girl has outwitted me! You must have been careless, Black Van, to let her get the power to slay you."

His words were addressed to the person on the floor, at whom he was looking with a second match burning over his head.

"By Jove! I'd like to know how all this happened!" he said, in a perplexed tone. "Where is Nina? Get up, Black Van, and tell me."

Springing forward, with madness blazing in his eyes, he struck the body with his foot; but, of course, elicited no response, for the lips of the dark-faced wood-hawk would never part again.

There was a mystery about the corpse on the floor that roused the outlaw's excitement. Leaving it, he searched the room, but saw no living occupant.

Black Van, as he called him, had not been dead long. The trail of his slayer was not to be seen, and the longer Devil Dick hunted, the deeper, the more impenetrable, grew the mystery. There was no disguising the fact that the dead man had been Nina's jailer. From the night when, in the guise of a Sioux Indian and a member of Powder-Face's band, he received the girl from the talons of Vipera, Black Van had guarded her with the eyes of a Cerberus. His little hut, screened from the observation of the shrewdest, and its existence undreamed of by Little Death-Step, it was a fit place for the immurement of the fair girl, who had excited the passions of the handsome and unscrupulous Devil Dick.

But now, coming back to make love in his wild way to the girl-slayer, he found the lift unbroken save by the corpse of the jailer. His surprise and wonderment increasing every moment, is not to be wondered at.

The night was now well advanced. His interview with Vipera, and his flight from her den had occupied several hours, and daylight was not far away. Spurning the flickering match he went to the door and looked out. Through an opening in the foliage overhead he saw the glittering stars, and for a minute he stood on the threshold, and looked up as if contemplating their beauty.

But Devil Dick never saw beauty in the firmament; he was planning with his head uplifted, not admiring the constellations which, moving across the heavens, brought the flush of dawn from the land of the East.

"I'm a hunted man now!" he said, gritting his teeth. "Every rifle in these parts is turned against me. I haven't got a companion left. Not one hand between Sully and Randal would lift itself to give me a minute's life. But, I am going to come out ahead, despite the hand of fate. Devil Dick is not going to give in yet. Not! he will yet lord it over the Yellowstone country, and the girl who has escaped from Black Van shall be his queen there, and the Indians' queen as well. Powder-Face knows that I have deserted him; he will turn aside from a rich train to hunt his old comrade in border crime."

"Good luck, my fellows!" he instantly called out to the troopers. "In there is a woman who can tell you where Powder-Face is at this moment. If you want her you must be quick. I'll shut off her escape from the rear window."

With the last word still quivering his lips, Devil Dick darted around the house while Captain Dingley and several of his band threw themselves from the saddles, and sprung over the threshold.

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At that moment the half-muffled report of a fire-arm fell upon the fugitive's ears.

"The tigress is fighting!" he said.

It was even so, for Vipera, the squaw wife, had sent a bullet crashing through the brain of one of Dingley's men.

waves were playing with the fringes of the outlaw's cape which dipped into the water.

All at once a sound to his left made the drinker leap to his feet, and the sight which met his gaze paled his cheek.

Not far away two figures seated on the backs of horses were looking at him.

Their cast of countenance told the Demon that they had suddenly come upon him without previously suspecting his whereabouts, therefore the surprise was mutual.

"Halt!" called out the voice of one of the twain, and Dick heard the click of two rifle-locks. "Tell us who you are and that quickly or we'll let the morning light stream into your skull."

The speaker was a boy in years; his companion was a rawboned fellow who had the appearance of the bottom wood-hawk.

Devil Dick heard every word that fell from the youth's lips. His keen eye ran over the ground that intervened between him and the pair; he knew that a low growth of oaks and cottonwoods was behind him, and suddenly, as a shout of defiance pealed from his throat, he turned, and like a startled deer ran again for his life.

"Powder and caps! Kit!" exclaimed the youth, lowering his rifle. "That villain must not escape. My life against a fox scaly that he is Devil Dick!"

The next instant the speaker's horse, struck keenly by the spurs, darted swiftly forward with a snort of pain, and Little Death-Step plunged into the thicket after the branded outlaw.

Wood-hawk Kit followed to the edge of the undergrowth; but his horse, unwilling to enter, became unruly, and before the rider could subdue him to his management, Death-Step had disappeared!

CHAPTER XII.

IN POWDER-FACE'S CLUTCHES.

We have seen Pierre Plotty, the double-dealer, meet that fate which his scoundrelism carried on for several years on the frontier, richly deserved.

Retracing our steps to that hour, we will seek the slayer.

The Demons with whom the cunning old wood-hawk was riding at the time of his death, were skirting the bank of the turbulent Missouri, fifty feet above the water's edge. The cavalcade was thus visible to any one who might be stationed along the river, and the reader will recollect that Little Death-Step and Kit heard the report of the deadly gun, but did not see the flash.

This circumstance must be attributed to the slayer's position, which was at a spot almost directly beneath the Frenchman's death-place.

Seated on the back of a lithe-limbed Indian pony, and holding a rifle, from whose muzzle a wreath of dark smoke went slowly upward, was the destroyer. The figure visible was elegantly formed; not very stout, but capable of much endurance, and boastful of no little strength. The face of the killer was not visible, for it was hidden by that strange mask several times described in the foregoing pages—the eyes, feathers and beak of that king of the skies—the American Eagle.

A low cry of satisfaction came from the beak as Pierre Plotty threw up his crime-stained hands and fell backward from his steed.

Started by the shot, the Demon band put spurs to their horses, and soon disappeared, leaving their confederate where he had fallen, to be found soon afterward, as we have seen, by Death-Step and his friend the wood-hawk.

"One more taken from Powder-Face!" the slayer said, in a voice that had much melody in its tones. "The time is not far away when the grass of this beautiful land will not be crushed by the foot of a single Demon. The night of the massacre of Murtagh's train has not been forgotten by the little girl who hid under the hindmost wagon."

Speaking still, as if addressing some one overhead, the eagle-headed person gathered up the reins and went off at a light gallop down the bank. Now in shadow, and anon in the silvery moonlight, the rider presented a spectral appearance; but at last the horse left the river and entered a beautiful forest of oak—the wood-hawk's delight.

Everywhere the work of the early frost was visible. Despite the hour and the light, the strange hues of the leaves were distinguishable; as the light wind sung through the trees, myriads of leaves came down in showers, at times so fast that it seemed as if one was overhead shaking them from the boughs.

The slayer had ridden six or seven miles from the spot where the Frenchman had received his death-wound, and the place where the hilt was made looked like a meeting-ground. The eagle-head still covered the face of the pony's rider, hiding the features as effectually as if an iron mask concealed them.

"I need not look for a letter," said the melodious voice; "so often have I been disappointed. He must think me dead, and Kit—his cabin has been deserted these many days, if the interior be a criterion from which to judge. However, one can look."

The speaker put forth a fair and shapely hand as the last words were uttered, and it disappeared in the fork of the majestic oak beneath whose boughs rein had been drawn.

"Nothing, as I expected!" was spoken, as the hand was withdrawn empty. "After all, he may have told the truth when he said that Lee died under the hand of Vipera. I was foolish to carry him there, but I knew of no other place then, and I trusted old Arvan. He even intimated that the tigress, in a fit of passion, killed him. If this be true, beware, Vipera! for the day of vengeance will come, even to you. No letter and no word from them! Well, I'll go; perhaps I may meet Powder-Face again before dawn, or the soldiers. Dick said that

There was defiance and independence mingled in the outlaw's voice, and he brought the palm of his right hand heavily against his breast as the final word dropped from his lips.

Then he stepped from the cabin, leaving the night-wind that came up the autumn-leaved aisles to enter and fan the face of the dead, for whose fate the Demon had not expressed one word of regret.

Devil Dick passed away toward the Missouri which half a mile from the hut swept majestically to the south.

He reached the bank of the stream just as day was breaking and rendering objects visible. A ragging thirst was burning the outlaw's throat, and hastening to the muddy current, which a hundred times he had spurned with disgust, he threw himself down and began to drink.

Behind him day was flaring in the east: the sky was exhibiting its ceiling of azure; the silver-tipped

the blue-coats had come up from Fort Randall, and he laughed like a fiend when he said that they would never go back to their banks. Never, Devil Dick? Ah! you do not know about that!"

The Demon's trailer would have turned from the tree, if a sound, whose import could not be mistaken, had not come from the south.

"Somebody's coming," the slayer said, starting, and the girlish fingers cocked the deadly repeating rifle. "I will stand and see who they be, for to ride away now would betray me and invite pursuit if they be foes, for the leaves are dry and will give forth sounds."

Slinking nearer to the sturdy tree, the eyes that burned like brilliants beyond the eagle-beak, watched along the streak of moonlight which ran parallel with the stream, and just without the line of timber.

The sound of hoofs was now plainly heard, and presently a single horseman came into view, like a ghost at first, but soon distinguishable.

"Hal! better fortune than I expected," ejaculated the watcher, eagerly. "Now, I can put an end to much of the crime that has blackened these parts. He will never know that I did it. I believe him dead, and I have a right to drop this Demon."

Nearer and nearer came the mounted figure, whose Indian dress was visible. The horse was proceeding at an ambling gait; but when the watcher's steed darted suddenly into the moonlight, the occupant of the saddle started back and drew rein.

"Halt, Powder-Face!" came the stern command from the eagle-head, and the rifle went up till it covered the Indian's heart.

A cry of astonishment escaped the lips of the Demon of Dakota, thus brought suddenly face to face with the strange destroyer. To attempt flight would prove instant death, for the muzzle of the deadly rifle was not twenty feet away, and he could see a tapering finger at the trigger.

Powder-Face did not speak. He looked from the rifle to the eagle-head, and dropped his eyes to the weapon again.

Death, and that from the rifle of a merciless trail-er, stared him in the face.

"You are in my hands!" said the voice of the slayer, breaking the silence. "You are not thinking that I am going to spare you!"

"A person who has followed me like a demon is expected to shoot me down like a dog."

"Hal! hal just as if you deserved a better fate!" was the response. "Powder-Face, I have a curiosity. Will you settle it for me?"

There was no reply. It was evident that the archfiend regarded the destroyer's words in a contemptuous light, spoken to tantalize him.

"If you do not choose to tell me, I can discover after I have touched the trigger. Are you red or white?"

"Find it out as best you can!" was the snappish answer.

"That is just what I propose doing. There is paint all over your face; but notwithstanding this, it is said that you are a white man, like Devil Dick. The soldiers at Sully and Randall have wagered their pay on this question. Red or white, Powder-Face? which?"

"As you are going to find out, why need I answer?" the Demon said. "Suppose I should seek to know who you are; but don't I know that you are the fellow what we hanged the other night? If we had tied the bear to your legs, you wouldn't be here to shoot me down without mercy!"

A laugh answered Powder-Face's words.

"So you pulled me up, eh?"

"Yes, and if we hadn't been interrupted we'd have finished the job."

"But you got a volley from the moon?"

The villain bit his lip and scowled at the slayer.

"Oh, let us put an end to this parley. I am lucky to-night. I dropped one of your band down the river!"

"Pierre Plotty! a mean, cunning dog—no loss to me."

"It was the double-dealer, then?" uttered the slayer, in a voice of surprise, and then added in a whisper: "Justice directed my bullet to his brain."

For a moment silence surrounded the stirring tableau on the bank of the Missouri.

The burly figure of Powder-Face afforded a splendid target for the young slayer; but to sit there and calmly receive the bullet nestling in the depths of the gun, was far from the fiend's intention.

All at once, and quicker than a thunderbolt, the outlaw dropped on the neck of his steed, which bounded forward, and fell with a terrible shock upon the pony of the slayer!

The attack came so unexpected and sudden that the most agile could not have avoided it. A wild cry came from the destroyer's throat as the animals met, and the pony went backward under the horse's weight. Of course the masked foe was wrenched from the saddle, the rifle was torn from the girlish hands, and for a moment the figure disappeared from sight.

All this was the work of an instant.

Powder-Face shouted like a demon as he sprung upon his foe, and his horse, strong of limb and infuriated by the great spurs, which he drove vengeance fully into the rowels, went completely over his diminutive antagonist without falling.

But the slayer avoided being bruised by the fall of the Indian horse by leaping unscathed from the *mélée*, and alighting on the ground in good trim, though minus the rifle.

Powder-Face reined in his horse before he had proceeded two rods from the battle-field. He was quick as a flash, and had a complete mastery over the animal.

"Ho! my little tiger!" he cried, whirling upon the

slayer. "Red or white, eh? Powder-Face will answer that question; but first he'll tear off the eagle-head and see you as you are!"

Rapid as was the Demon's change of front, the destroyer tried to receive him. A pistol bullet whistled through the feathers that adorned his scalp-lock as he swooped down upon his prey, and before a second one could be sent on a deadlier errand, the revolver was knocked from the killer's hands, and the conflict was ended.

"Hal! you didn't have the pleasure of ridding these parts of old Powder-Face!" cried the Demon, looking into the eagle-face of the captive whom he held in his strong arms. "Ah! you needn't glare at me from behind those feathers, for you're no more eagle than I am. I am not going to kill you here. What do you say to being flung among my Demons like they fling a rabbit among the big snakes in their cages?"

There was something terrible in the threat, poorly hidden among the fiend's words; but if he could have looked beyond the feathers that covered the cheeks of the killer, he would have seen no sign of terror.

"Oh, you're going to take it out in looking, eh?" he continued, irritated and maddened by the captive's silence. "Trying to see whether Powder-Face is red or white. What are you, my little wood-cat? White as snow about this time, I'll bet my scalp!"

Quick as thought the red hand of the villain flew

to the mask, and with one mad wrench it was torn off and flung toward the river. The features of Nina were revealed.

"A gal!" cried Powder-Face, starting from the sight, but holding onto his prisoner. "You're not the chap what we hanged down by Kit's cabin. But you've been shooting us all the same. That's all I want to know. What have we done to you?"

"What more could you have done?" was the reply. "I will not tell you, for I have sworn that I will not tell you why I turned vengeance-hunter until I face you as the last one left of your band of Demons!"

"Then you'll never tell me!" thundered the Demon chief. "You're the gal what Devil Dick's talked so much about. You'll never get away from us now."

The eyes of the outlaw flashed with devilish delight.

"Red or white, eh?" he laughed in the girl's face. "Those hated blue-coats at the forts will never know."

It was a wild laugh that made the forest ring, and it had an answer.

The galloping of horses was now heard, and certain signals which Powder-Face answered brought a dozen Indians quickly to the spot.

"Look, Demons! see the bird old Powder-Face has caught!" cried the victor, holding Nina up to their sight. "I tore the eagle-head off, and here's the face of the tracker!"

Cries of savage delight burst from scarlet throats, and Nina caught the gleam of Indian knives as they leaped from buck-skin belts!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VENGEANCE OF DINGLEY'S MEN.

"STAND back! We must be careful whose blood we spill in this country! I know what my orders are. Be men! soldiers! don't let bad blood get the best of you!"

Captain Dingley had thrown himself between his maddened soldiery, and the red woman, in whose scrawny hands was still gripped the musket which had taken the life of one of his command.

The reader will recollect the circumstance: the troopers' arrival at Vipera's cabin, while she held Devil Dick at her mercy; the villain's escape by deceiving the cavalry, and the soldiers' entrance for the purpose of arresting the frontier hag.

Vipera had a reputation for evil even at Fort Randall. Her black arts were known throughout the wood-hawks' territory, and her influence was great. Feared, and, to a certain degree respected, she was not to be molested by Dingley, whose orders were to make war on Powder-Face and his Demons, and to arrest Pierre Plotty, if he found cause for such act. But in no way to offer bodily harm to any person who might rouse the wood-hawks, and pit them and their dark-skinned progeny against his command.

At the words which fell from his lips, when he cast his body before the squaw wife, whose hands had just been reddened by the blood of a soldier, his men uttered curses and slunk sullenly back.

"Orders be hanged, cap'n!" they growled. "Are we to submit to murder, an' that by such a tigress as she? Must we ride back to Randall an' say that a red witch killed poor Farley, an' that we never avenged his death; but slunk away like cowards, an' left her to show her bloody hands, an' boast of her devilish deed? Look at the boy, cap'n. He was my messmate. Look at him, murdered there, and then lift your head to the pitiless eyes of that she-rattlesnake!"

Dingley's lips quivered when his gaze fell upon the youthful trooper lying at his feet, shot through the brain by Vipera; but he did not step aside, but held the cocked revolver firmly in his hand.

"The hour has not come for vengeance," he tried to say, with a soldier's firmness; but the attempt was a sorry failure. "Why, we'd have a hundred of her admirers upon us before we had accomplished our mission. The Sioux would swoop down upon us."

"Let them come!" cried the soldier, who had before replied to his captain's words. "We must not take her blood, eh? By Jove! we will not leave this witch's nest to be the death-bed of another boy in blue. Boys, stand by me! No harm to the cap'n, mind ye, but destruction to this hut of sorcery."

The men, by certain words and signs caught by the quick ears and eyes of Corporal Beall, signified

their eagerness to second him in anything he might do; and before Dingley could lift the weapon, even if he would have done so against his own men, he was seized by the trooper, and, despite his struggles, firmly yet gently held.

"No harm, cap'n!" said the corporal, with a smile. "We'll not harm the vixen, as your orders forbid it; but we're going to prevent any more deaths in this forest den."

Vipera, fighting with all the fury of a whelp-robed tigress, was, after a desperate struggle, secured and bound. Despite her scrawny arms and bony hands, she displayed wonderful strength; but she was dragged from the hut, and lashed to a tree some distance away. Dingley was not treated to this indignity, but was led from the scene and ordered to mount his horse, which he quietly did.

The exasperated soldiers were determined to destroy the hut. Dingley saw this in their eyes.

They had fled from, as they supposed, Powder-Face and his band but a short time before, and fate had brought them to Vipera's cabin, whose light they had seen while yet some distance off. In reality, as the reader knows, they had retreated from Little Death-Step, who had personated Powder-Face for the purpose of trying the soldiers' mettle.

A few minutes' work sufficed to pile what little furniture the den was provided with in the center of the room, and a torch was thrust beneath it.

Not until the flames bid fair to destroy the structure did the last trooper leave the ranch, and from among the trees all gazed upon the work of the fire.

A darker countenance, and one more replete with feline-like than the Sioux squaw's, is difficult to imagine. From the tree to which not the gentlest of hands had lashed her, she contemplated the destruction of her cabin, anon casting mad looks at the excited soldiers, who were kept from throwing her among the flames only by their captain's pleadings.

The light of the burning cabin illuminated the adjacent country and fell upon the little stream which, not far away, poured its quota of water into the turbulent Missouri.

While the cabin was burning, other scenes almost as thrilling were occurring.

Not a great way off Nina was putting an end to the life of Pierre Plotty, and Powder-Face was riding toward that exciting combat which, as we have seen, put the girl-slayer into his power.

The troopers did not stir until the logs falling into a sea of fire assured them that never again would a blue-coat fall there. They then buried young Farley and prepared to depart. Dingley was released from custody, and congratulated by many a look for his quiet submission.

"No, cap'n, we're going to leave her there," said Corporal Beall, touching Dingley's arm with a restraining effort as the officer moved toward Vipera still lashed to the tree. "We haven't harmed her person! the orders have not been broken. Come, cap'n, lead us away. We're satisfied now, an' willing to follow you."

A glance at the soldiers who had sprung to saddle told Dingley that Beall echoed their desires, and he turned to the woman.

"You may thank your stars that my men have respected their orders so far as not to offer you bodily harm," he said, to her. "You have committed the basest of murders. The burning of your hut does not avenge the death of Farley, one of the best boys in the service."

A score of "That's so, cap'n's" followed Dingley's address; but the scarlet woman did not reply. A dark, lowering glance full of bloodthirstiness and future vengeance was her only response, and the soldier, anxious to escape, led his men quickly away.

Behind them the den of evil deeds was fast crumbling into ruin, and the flush of dawn would soon fall upon the scene of revenge and desolation.

Dingley rode at the head of his troop in meditative mood. The death of Farley, beloved and respected by the entire command for his youth and gentleness, fell like a pall over the hearts of the men. Those who saw the flash of Vipera's eyes knew that they had not seen the last of her, and that the burning of her hut was to be paid for with the border price of blood.

Captain Dingley was a brave man. His flight from the stern voice before Kit's cabin does not impugn his courage. He believed that he and his men stood exposed to the rifles of Powder-Face and his band, rifles which had never been known to spare a United States soldier. But Dingley was puzzled by the ease with which he had escaped from the Demons; no volley and no pursuit. He was nonplussed, and as he rode from Vipera's burning hut he was trying to explain this mystery.

By and by the command emerged from the wood, and struck a savanna whose long grass, whitened by the early frosts, was drying fast, and presenting a scene beautiful beyond description.

Dingley drew rein at the edge of the little savanna, across which he could look and see the woods again, and sent a "halt" over his shoulder to his men.

"We can reach the timber yonder quicker by going across than by riding around," the captain said to Beall, indicating the routes mentioned with a wave of his hand as he spoke.

"Much quicker, all things considered, cap'n; but daylight might overtake us in the grass an' expose us to any foes who may be in the timber," was the corporal's reply.

"Whom do you suspect of being yonder?" Dingley asked, rather tartly. "Powder-Face?"

Beall flushed as he answered:

"There's no telling who's there. We must be careful in this country."

The captain bit his lip. At any other time Beall would have been severely rebuked for his words of

ferred to a superior; but they were permitted to pass apparently unnoticed.

"We will cross the savanna," said Dingley, suddenly, and the next moment the troop advanced.

The command now found itself beneath the azure and star-studded canopy of heaven. The light winds that came across the patch of grass-land rustled the long blades against the horses' legs, and kissed the points of the troopers' scabbards.

The night was unusually bright and clear, so much so indeed, that the soldiers could see the wood toward which they were riding. No word was spoken as the command advanced, and nothing occurred to mar the journey until the middle of the savanna had been reached, when an oath announced that a girth had broken.

"We'll all rest till Norris fixes his girth," were the words with which Dingley supplemented the order to halt.

The "break" was more serious than was at first supposed, and many minutes were consumed in repairing the misfortune. But at last the cavalryman vaulted again into the saddle, and the command moved on.

But precious time had been consumed; the star dials were pointing to dawn, and the constellations were fading, as it were, from the sky.

The leaves on the trees, not far ahead, were becoming visible, and Beall was congratulating himself on the safe passage of the savanna, for he feared an ambush, when all at once a shrill voice startled him and his comrades.

"Back! back! Come no nearer, for the sake of heaven! for you will be at the mercy of Powder-Face and his fiends!"

As if a bombshell had dropped in their path, Dingley and his men started back.

The voice came from among the trees just ahead, and following it quickly came a mad cry of disappointment, then a pistol-shot and—silence!

White-faced and startled beyond description by these occurrences, the troopers did not know what to do.

But only for a moment.

"Umsling carbines!" came the clear command from Dingley's throat. "Forward! Charge the fiends!"

With exclamations which showed their willingness to follow where Dingley led the soldiers dashed forward, and the next minute a perfect hailstorm of rifle-balls were poured into their faces from the trees.

But they answered it with yells of defiance, and never for an instant swerved an inch aside.

Dingley's men had "grit," despite their late retreat.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEVIL DICK AGAIN.

JUST before reaching the wood, Dingley's troopers sent a volley among the dark figures now seen but indistinctly flitting among the trees.

A few scattering shots were elicited in reply, and two cavalrymen fell from their steeds, fatally wounded. But this fatality did not damp the ardor of the soldiers; they continued firing, but without any apparent effect, as the foe retreated in the uncertain light, and made good their escape, leaving behind two dead men and three horses.

The little band of troopers were elated over their victory. They had unquestionably encountered Powder-Face and his Demons, and had routed them in a fair fight. But they could not but reflect upon the narrow escape which they had happily had from falling into an ambush from which few, if any, would have emerged alive.

That mysterious voice warning them in time to prevent a massacre still rung in their ears, and they were at a loss to know who had delivered it.

Morning, with her roseate hues, now dawned upon the little battle-field. The trail taken by the discomfited Demon band was quite plain, and Dingley would have thrown himself upon it if one of his troopers had not made a startling discovery.

Lying in the long grass which, in many places, hid the roots of the oaks and cottonwoods, the soldier found the shapely body of a youth, clad in fancy buck-skin garments. It was the faultless beauty of the pallid face which caused him to start back with an exclamation of wonder, and the next instant his comrades flocked around him.

"Merciful heavens! it is a girl!" cried Captain Dingley, leaping from his horse and dropping beside the body. "What? such a fair young creature with those fiends! Dead? dead she is, I fear, men! I wonder if our bullets struck her?"

"Heaven forbid!" came from half a dozen throats. "Cap'n, the pistol shot after the warning."

"True, Beall; I had forgotten it," ejaculated the commander of the squadron. "This is the creature who warned us, and they shot her for the blessed deed. Look! how beautiful!"

Dingley was holding the tress-enshrined face on his knee, and looking up at his sympathetic soldiers.

"Who ever heard of a young girl in these parts?"

Each trooper shook his head.

"She could not have been with Powder-Face of her free will, because she warned us. See! there have been cords about her wrists. Curse the man who could have taken such a child's life!"

Dingley was speaking the last word, when his corporal sprung forward with a cry of joy and caught the captain's arm.

"Hold her head still!" cried Beall. "By my soul! I saw the peerless creature move her hand. There! the eyelids are unclosing. She lives! Three cheers for the gal what dared to save us while she was old Powder-Face's captive."

The enthusiastic soldiers evinced a desire to cheer, but a look from their leader kept them silent.

"Ay, I see the eyeballs now," Dingley said, glancing approvingly at Beall. "Now let us have water, and we will see about this."

Twenty canteens were instantly proffered and the contents of one went to moisten the face and hands of the young girl, who the reader has, ere this, suspected of being Nina.

The troopers looked on with much interest, holding their breath as they mentally debated the girl's chances for recovery.

Slowly the white lips unclosed, and a pair of eyes began to wander aimlessly about. A small quantity of brandy was forced between the thin and bloodless lips, and at last a shout of triumph burst from the attentive soldiers.

"Ah! Powder-Face, I am with you still!" were the first intelligible words that fell from Nina's lips.

A laugh, suppressed by a look from the captain, greeted the words.

"Not Powder-Face, child!" said Dingley's gentle voice. "We are United States troops, the hunters of that forest fiend, and his cutthroats."

"And I am with you!"

"Yes."

"Heaven, I thank Thee! Living still, to be in at the death."

The lips met firmly behind the last sentence which told of a vow, a stern determination to hunt old Powder-Face down.

"In at the death?" echoed Dingley. "We hope to be there too, child."

"But you do not hunt him as I do. He never killed you—"

Nina paused and shut her eyes.

"Poor thing!" said more than one soldier whose rough heart went out in sympathy to the creature still lying weak in the captain's lap.

"He troubles our Government and it is our duty to hunt him down," Dingley answered. "Our orders—"

"Orders are imperative, but they must not interfere with my work!" interrupted Nina, suddenly rising and facing the majority of the cavalrymen. "They caught me last night. I had Powder-Face before my rifle, but he suddenly spurred his horse upon me, and I fell into his hands! After awhile his Demons came up. They knew me—ah! they have cause to do that," and the narrator smiled meaningfully. "Knives and pistols flashed all around me, and I gave myself up as lost. But Powder-Face faced them with a revolver in one hand and swore that he would shoot the first Demon who touched me. For awhile they appeared about to ride him down, and fear me piecemeal; but he cowed them, every one, and I saw the weapons put up suddenly, and with more than one terrible oath. Powder-Face declared that I was his captive, and, with my hands tied behind me, I was borne away on a horse which walked beside his animal. They rendered me helpless, and I expected to feel a knife in my back or hear my last pistol crack, every minute.

"I know not whether the Demons were going when we halted here," continued the girl-slayer, seeing the soldiers still waiting for more of the narrative of her adventures. "We heard you beyond the savanna, and here Powder-Face formed the ambush. I did not know who you were until you halted out there in the starlight. We were in the grass; our horses, well trained, as Powder-Face's animals are, were lying down. On you came, straight toward us. It was a critical moment: my heart was in my throat. When I heard the clicking of rifle-locks all around me, I could not keep my tongue still longer. I saw you brave soldiers at the mercy of a set of fiends who had never spared a scalp covered by an army cap. Then it was that I warned you, and quick as flash the report of a gun at my elbow made my ears ring, and all became dark."

"They shot you, then!" said Dingley, who had listened spellbound to Nina's simple story of her noble deed.

"But they did not kill, captain!" she answered, with a smile. "The man who shot was Powder-Face himself. He was at my left, and from that direction came the ball."

For a moment silence followed the girl's story. The soldiers were gazing with admiration upon their preserver standing before them, pale but excited, a bright gleam in her eyes, a tragic pose of figure.

"Yes, I am alive yet, to hunt him and his fiends!" she cried. "But you, soldiers, have you seen aught of a boy since your arrival in this part of the country?"

Nina's face was full of anxiety.

"We have not," Dingley answered.

"Nor aught of Hare-foot, the wood-hawk?"

"We left him last night near his own cabin."

"Then he still lives! The boy, I fear, is dead. He told me that Lee would never trouble Powder-Face again. Then I must take his work onto myself. I shall do it. Oh, Lee! they shall pay for the shedding of your blood!"

The girl seemed oblivious of the fact that she was surrounded by soldiers. It was Beall's voice that called her back to the present.

"Oh, my wound!" she cried, with a light laugh, turning upon the corporal. "Did Powder-Face give me one? The bullet is not in my brain—that is certain!"

"And while we are near, one shall never nestle there."

The speaker was Dingley.

"We'll see about that, blue-coats! I'll take the girl now, or give her that ball you would keep away. Come! come! my fellars! no picking up o' guns. I've got the dead-drop on you, an' I'll take care that it'll be a fatal one!"

These words, as might be expected, threw the troops into the greatest consternation.

Every eye was instantly turned upon the speaker. Not far away, he sat aside of a mettled horse. He was hatless, dark-faced, and handsome, and, in each hand, thrust forward over the horse's ears, he held a Colt of the navy pattern.

It was Devil Dick!

CHAPTER XV.

THE RESULT OF THE DEAD-DROP.

In order to account for the Dakota outlaw's sudden appearance before Dingley's victorious troops, we must, for a moment, retrace our steps to the close of the chapter, which described him surprised by Little Death-Step and Wood-hawk Kit on the banks of the Missouri.

When Devil Dick recognized his enemies, he plunged into the patch of undergrowth which fortunately offered an avenue of escape, but found himself pursued by the boy slayer. Then the outlaw was without a horse, having been compelled to leave his charger in the hands of the Government soldiers in his eagerness to elude them at Vipera's den. But he was not without arms: besides the repeating-rifle which he carried he was possessed of two good revolvers, the inseparable companions of the Western outlaw of the present day.

Plunging through the undergrowth and eager to come up with the white Sioux or to get a shot at him, Death-Step kept on. His progress was noted by the outlaw by rapid glances over his shoulder, and at last, with an oath, he came to a sudden halt.

"What's the use of running from a boy?" he cried, with a proud curling of the lip. "This thing of running along but to stumble over unseen obstacles when a shot might put an end to the chase is foolish."

The day was not far advanced; the trees around him looked like gigantic ghosts.

All at once, like a tiger brought to bay in his native jungle, Devil Dick stopped and turned upon his pursuer.

There was murder in the Demon's eyes, and, as a figure came suddenly into view, the rifle flew to his shoulder.

Quick as the action was, Death-Step caught sight of it, and tried to avoid the ball.

But his agility could not beat the outlaw's rapid aim, and before his horse could answer the jerk of the rein and the command which followed it, there came a sharp crack like a wagoner's whip from the chaparral, and the boy slayer fell backward to the ground.

"Wiped out at last!" grated the bandit, with delight. "When you put on another eagle's-head and feller me up and down the Big Muddy, jest let me know!"

Devil Dick closed his sentence abruptly, for the horse, released of his burden, and not a little terrified, had sprung forward as if intending to dash the slayer to the ground.

A path seemed to lead from the spot where Death-Step had fallen to the outlaw's post, and the animal came straight on. Devil Dick waited for him behind a tree, and suddenly with a shout of joy darted forward and seized the reins before the steed could escape.

"Once more on horseback!" he shot from between his teeth as he vaulted like an acrobat into the saddle from which his boy foe had just reeled, probably shot through the brain. "They'll all hear of Devil Dick before he leaves it again, too. I feel at home once more, and the brute looks like a racer."

With a look behind for Wood-hawk Kit, the Dakota bandit turned to the right and rode rapidly away.

He left the path of young oaks and found himself again in the forest, where the trees were more pretentious in size and stateliness.

Drawing rein for an instant, he looked around as if to make sure of his bearings in the uncertain light and then rode off in a south-western direction, and at a smart gallop.

A prouder man than the handsome outlaw at that moment never sat astride of a horse. His eyes continually gleamed with pleasure, not unmixed with that pride to be found only in the hearts of the wild western character whose life is ever carried in his own hands. Horse and man seemed well fitted for companionship. The former was faultless in frame, capable of great endurance and swiftness. He had a deep, fiery eye, a beautifully arched neck, and a skin as glossy as new silk.

Wood-hawk Kit no longer pursued the outlaw. If that worthy could have penetrated the thicket which he had lately left, he might have caught sight of a man and a dog gazing with horror upon the body of a boy stretched at full length upon the dewy grass and autumn-tinted leaves.

Wood-hawk Kit and Mango!

But Devil Dick kept on until he suddenly drew his horse aside and forced him down among the luxuriant grass which grew about the spot.

The cause for this sudden caution was soon explained, for a party of Indians dashed rapidly by without even suspecting the presence of the startled man.

"Powder-Face, by my life!" ejaculated Devil Dick. "Stars and telescopes! whar are they goin'?"

But the question was not answered, for the Demons soon disappeared.

The Dakota bandit rose with the most puzzled of countenances, and for a moment stared after the pests of the frontier like a man just awaking from a dream.

He had not heard the sounds of battle which rose skyward when the cavalrymen met Powder-Face

Just at that time he was exercised over his own safety.

"Somebody's run 'em!" was the conclusion to which the hunted outlaw finally came. "That's only ten of 'em left; they must have left several back thar. I'm goin' to see who met 'em; the soldiers the most likely—my old friend, Horatio Dingley!"

Devil Dick, eager to discover the cause of Powder-Face's flight through the wood, continued his journey, but with more caution than heretofore; and not long afterward he came almost suddenly upon a group of dismounted cavalrymen, who were clustered about an object which he could but indistinctly see.

Dingley's men, for such was the identity of the soldiers, were oblivious to everything save the fair being whose head lay in their leader's lap; they were listening intently to the story which fell from her lips, and, thanks to the moisture in leaves and grass, of which Dick was quick to take advantage, the boy slayer's horse advanced unperceived.

A more than fiendish flash lit up the handsome eyes of the outlaw, as he drew his pistols, and, pointing them over his horse's head, covered the unsuspecting troopers.

Then it was that his musical tones, but stern, fell upon their ears, and caused every one to start as if the voice of doom had suddenly assailed them.

"How's this for a dead-drop, my hearties?" laughed the wild fellow. "Down with your pop-guns! The first blue-coat who attempts to lift one will get a discharge from the service—one that'll last forever!"

Dick saw the face of more than one soldier grow pale; he noted, too, the eyes of Captain Dingley fastened upon him; they said to him, "we have met before," and his own eyes sent back a confirmation.

Nina, the girl, shrank from the bandit with a cry of fear falling from her lips.

She recognized him on the instant.

"It is Devil Dick!" she cried, turning upon Dingley, as she pointed to the handsome face which wore a fiendish smile. "That is the man who made me what I am—he and Powder-Face. Do you not see that he acknowledges the charge, with a smile that cannot be mistaken?"

"Ho! my bird, you are here!" came the voice of Devil Dick. "I found the cage empty, the bird flown and the keeper dead. You are full of cunning to overcome Black Van. I want you! There is another cage that is very strong; it is far away, and the keeper is Devil Dick. Come out from among the blue-coats. I cannot parley long."

Dingley wheeled upon the speaker, and even stepped forward with a hand on his revolver.

"No, captain!" said the bandit. "Don't make me touch the trigger. You've got a wife at Randall; I want to send my compliments to her, and I want you to carry 'em. All I want now is the gal!"

A moment's silence followed the last word.

"What if we refuse to give her up?" asked Dingley.

"I'll empty these navies before one of you can lift a gun. Dingley, I haven't forgot how to shoot yet. What do you say? Be quick about it!"

The troopers bit their lips, and inwardly cursed the man who held their lives in his power.

What! give up the girl whom they had delivered from Powder-Face, to him? and see him bear her away to a life worse than death itself?

The thought combated the better nature of the soldiers; but what else could they do? Their own carelessness had permitted the outlaw to steal a march upon them; they could blame but themselves.

The strange lull which followed the threat about the emptying of the pistols which, thrust forward over the horse's head, looked like Dahlgrens to more than one terrified trooper, was suddenly broken by the girl.

She sprung from the midst of the group and straight toward the white Sioux.

"You, brave soldiers, shall not be shot on my account!" she cried, seeing as it were the words already leaping to Dingley's lips; words which would have sealed the fate of more than one soldier boy. "Captain Dingley, you will not say a word. I will go with Devil Dick. Stay where you are, soldiers. Do not risk your precious lives for Nina Morrow. There comes a time when we will meet again. I tell that monster yonder that the success which he has just gained will be turned into defeat, and that the day of vengeance as terrible as it shall be swift, is already dawning upon his last cr' me."

The final word still quivered the avenger's lips when she turned toward the Demon and sprung to his side.

"Here I am!" she said, looking up into his face a trifle paler than it was upon his arrival. "Devil Dick Hamilton, you can take the bird back; but no cage shall hold her."

There was no reply to this boast; but with a hand that still clutched one of the revolvers, the victor lifted the beautiful Nina from the ground.

"Good by!" he said, looking at the speechless cavalry men. "My compliments to Mrs. Dingley, my good Horatio. Ha! don't threaten to follow me, blue coats, for one of these pistols might accidentally go off and hit this frontier oriole!"

This covert threat was enough to deter the soldiers from pursuit, and with a wave of his pistoled hand, and a ringing laugh of victory, Devil Dick rode off with his prey.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THRESHOLD OF DOOM.

"ARTHQUAKES an' gin'ral destruction! A leetle nigher an' thar'd be a dead boy hereabouts. Things hev bin goin' ag'in' the youngster since he left the bleedin' knife in my shanty door; but he'll git his

work in yit, an' then thar'll be the grandest settling ov accounts anybody ever heerd on in these parts."

Still holding to the bridle-rein of his horse, from whose back he had dismounted, Wood-hawk Kit was standing over the prostrate body of Little Death-Step, stricken, as we have seen, by the ball from the outlaw's gun.

The assassin was far away, riding to the scenes which we have just witnessed, while his enemy and victim lay among the leaves with a bloody furrow across his cheek.

"I guess you'll hev to thank a limb that it warn't any worse," continued the wood-hawk, "fur Devil Dick is a bizness shot. Why, afore he became so bad, he used to shoot silver dollars what war flung into the air, an' while he war ridin' at full speed, too."

The speaker soon found that the boy slayer was not dead, and he tenderly lifted him from the ground and placed him in the saddle; then securing the youth's repeater, he mounted himself, and rode slowly and mournfully from the spot.

Wood-hawk Kit bent his steps toward the tenantless cabin, and reached it when the sun in the heavens was marking the hour of noon.

Little Death-Step had partially recovered from the effects of that vengeful shot which had been intended for his brain, and he looked up into the wood-hawk's face with a smile of joyful recognition as the horse halted before the hut.

Kit dismounted with his burden and led the horse across the threshold, in order that evil eyes might not see that the place was again inhabited. Then the boy's wounds were dressed by the harsh but gentle hands of the old wood-chopper; and when Death-Step had devoured the venison which Kit placed before him—a meal which he enjoyed with great relish—the sun was beginning to throw long streaks of golden light athwart the muddy waves of the Missouri.

"Kit," said the boy, with a suddenness that startled the wood-hawk, "I'm going to go back to civilization when I have settled accounts with two men, and, what is more, I'm going back alone!"

"Alone?" echoed Harefoot. "Hav you forgotton the gal?"

Little Death-Step's lips seemed to lose their color all at once.

"Can I forget what she said last night—that she has united her fortunes with Devil Dick's?"

"Do you believe she said that?" inquired the puzzled wood-hawk.

"How can I believe otherwise? Kit, you heard the voice; you turned pale as death, then. Do not deceive me! You still believe she spoke."

Harefoot's gaze, unable to meet the boy's, fell to the floor.

"Back thar in the States," he said, rallying, and with a hopeful gleam in his eyes, "yes, back thar you know, boy, in law, they giv the priser the benefit of the doubt. Ef you've got any, giv' it to the gal."

"Willingly I do this, Kit," was the reply, and Little Death-Step's look softened.

"But she spoke in her own voice, that is certain. If she had not taken this terrible step, why should she say so?"

"A pistol at her head?"

"But we found Devil Dick alone at the river—alone and on foot!"

The wood-hawk was again nonplussed.

"Let's quit talkin' on this subject," he said at last. "We can't agree, boy. I hev my opinion, you know. I hev known the gal longer nor you hev, an' I'll bet my dog that she thinks more ov you than she does of any other fellar on 'arth."

For a moment the wood-hawk's words, uttered with a positiveness that seemed to carry conviction with them, appeared to reassure the boy and dissipate his doubts; but he suddenly laid his hand on his companion's arm and said:

"But her voice—her declaration, Kit. Ah! the girls are alike, all the world over. I'm going back to the States alone!"

"Not a bit of it!" blurted the wood-hawk, with a look of insulted dignity. "Nina ar' one o' them gals what ain't like the rest. I don't give her up—not by a long shot!"

The wood-hawk was emphatic, and not wishing to argue further, the slayer turned his bandaged face away.

Kit believed that there was some delusion about the voice which they had heard in the forest. It was couched in Nina's tones—there was no mistake about this—but that she should unite herself to Devil Dick—this was a thought which had all the elements of repulsive ness to it.

It was while the couple were busy with their thoughts that Mango sprung toward the cabin door with a growl, and with bristles standing erect along his thick neck.

"What ar' up, dog?" cried the wood-hawk, springing to his feet, and rifle in hand, he halted the next instant at the threshold.

Hard upon the sound of his last word came a rap on the door, and then a voice, which made the portal open by the wood-hawk's hand.

Just beyond the threshold stood a horse, and the man who sat on the Government blanket strapped to the animal's back, was a specimen of low cunning and evil.

He was a smoky-faced, wiry person, about fifty years of age, stoop-shouldered, and illy clad. If the shadows had been longer and the man had worn a tuft of feathers in his head, he might easily have been taken for an Indian.

But Wood-hawk Kit recognized him in an instant.

"Hello! old chap," cried the wood-hawk. "What's up now? You don't get down into these parts often!"

The visitor grinned and showed his stained teeth, not unlike the fangs of a superannuated wolf.

"No, Kit; but ze house is all burned up. Squaw gone! Le diable! Powder-Face hez been thar."

"Powder-Face burn you out!" ejaculated Kit, throwing the speaker, Jean Arvan and Vipera's lord, a look of astonishment. "You're tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes; take care, old gudgeon!"

"No wool pull, pon ze soul!" said the Frenchman, lifting his hands with holy horror. "Powder-Face been up on ze little creek, an' burn house an' kill squaw-wife."

"What for?"

Arvan solemnly shook his head.

"Things look funny when one wild-cat eats another," said Kit. "Wal, what brought you hyar?"

The old man's eyes began to dance madly.

"Blood!" he shot, with terrible vindictiveness from between his yellow teeth. "I must hev help. Ze robbers are in Monsieur Plotty's hut."

"How do you know?" flashed the wood-hawk, quickly.

"Saw 'em thar, not long ago. Ven I come back an' finds house an' squaw-wife all gone, I foller ze trail, an' it stops thar. 'Pon my soul, Monsieur Harefoot, ze rascals be thar—all of 'em."

A sudden plan seemed to flash through the wood-hawk's mind, and the next moment his right hand seized the Frenchman, who, without ceremony, was jerked from his horse, and landed in the cabin.

"This old chap says that Powder-Face and his friends ar' hidin' in Plotty's den," he cried, turning to Little Death-Step, who, unobserved, had listened to the conversation just exchanged. "Thar's reason in it, boy, fur they're not apt to show 'emselves much at large durin' the day. They burned his shanty an' made way with that she-wolf, what made her den thar; all o' which I subscribe to, with pleasure."

All this time the old man was writhing but vainly in the vice-like grip of the wood-hawk. Kit held him tightly with the utmost apparent ease.

"I'm fur goin' down to Plotty's," he continued. "They'll creep out at dark, an' mebbe we kin settle some accounts what hez been standin' a long time on the books."

"Yes!" cried the boy, eagerly. "Let us go and make our rifles speak the death-warrants of some of those hounds. No time is to be lost."

Kit, with an approving look turned his attention to the wood-hawk.

He bound Jean Arvan with cords, notwithstanding his piteous protestations of good faith, and when through, tossed him rudely in one corner of the hut.

"When we hunt lions we don't take tigers along!" he said to the old man. "Now, sir, lie thar, an' keep still, fur life is uncommon uncertain in these parts."

With the look of the baffled wolf in his glittering eyes, the captive relapsed into dogged silence. He heard the cabin door closed against him, and in the long shadows, Kit and Little Death-Step rode away, the former mounted on the horse which the old wood-hawk had brought to the hut.

"There may be some trickery about his visit," suggested the boy.

"I think not. The old dog was thoroughly mad; why, boy, he looked like a tiger. He couldn't put on such a face jest to carry out a little game. I thought it war all sham when he first came up; but I guess he meant business."

As the two friends rode slowly over the rough ground, which would soon give place to a well-defined trail which led past Plotty's cabin, the boy drew a strange-looking object from his bosom and held it up to Kit's vision.

"Ar' you goin' to put it on?" queried the wood-hawk.

"Yes!" and the fur cap which the young speaker wore was cast aside as he spoke. "I may fulfill my oath to-night—who knows?"

The next moment the object which appeared to be a great eagle-head, was skipped over Little Death-Step's cranium, and the wood-hawk uttered an exclamation of wonderment.

"Arthquakes an' revolutions!" he cried. "When ar' you goin' to quit wearin' that death-cap?"

"When my work is done!" was the reply.

Behind the walers of the turbid river sunk the sun, leaving the spots lately beautified by his aureate beams cast in somber shadows. One by one the yellow leaves fell from the trees, and the few birds, still abroad, hopped from twig to twig without their evening song.

Slowly and like messengers of doom the two friends approached the double but beyond whose threshold many a drama of secret villainy had been enacted. Nothing had occurred to mar their journey thither—almost contrary to Little Death-Step's belief, they had fallen into no ambush, and when they halted and dismounted on the summit of the densely-wooded rise, which looked down upon the structure, he drew a long breath of relief.

Though the sun had set, it was not dark. The short twilight of the season was holding its reign over the scene, and the cabin was plainly revealed to the pair.

Side by side with repeating rifles in their hands crouched the hunters with their eyes fastened on the cabin.

Half an hour passed away.

Kit the wood-hawk grew impatient.

"Kin it be thar the old dog fooled us, arter all?" he said, in a tone of keenly-felt chagrin. "If he be, boy, when we go back, he'll never fool another man!"

The young avenger would have answered his companion; but the opening of the cabin door at that moment suppressed his words.

"Thar he is—the old fiend, himself!" said Kit. The door swung open cautiously and the face and shoulders of a savage were thrust out. The eyes that burned like stars behind the painted skin were distinctly visible to the watchers on the hill; they danced like a dervishes as they took in the surroundings of the hut.

"Old Jean didn't lie!" Little Death-Step heard a voice at his elbow say: "We've found the wolves at home. The old 'un is satisfied, fur back goes his head. Now, git ready!"

Even while Kit still spoke the door of the double-dealer's ranch was thrown wide open, and half-a-dozen Indian heads were recognized.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLOW THAT SLEW.

It was with intense excitement that Wood-hawk Kit and Little Death-Step watched the lawless tenants file from Pierre Plotty's infamous ranch. Each one held a bridle-rein, and a horse, saddled and otherwise equipped for a rider, followed.

Kit counted the Demons and when all had left the structure he glanced at the boy at his side and whispered:

"Thar be ten left. If the shootin'-irons don't fail us, thar'll be none d'rectly."

The boy's eyes beamed with vengeful delight as they returned the wood-hawk's look, and the next instant they were again fixed on the outlaws who were apparently waiting for their leader to speak.

"Don't forget!" Death-Step's lips said, in a low tone. "He is for me, therefore be careful how you shoot, Kit."

"Keerful as possible!" was Harefoot's reply.

"Thar's to be no restin' now till we find an' clean 'em out!" said Powder-Face, who sprung into the saddle as the words fell from his lips. "Thar's to be death an' destruction from this time on an' without stoppin'. Demons! we have foes on ev'ry side. They have killed Cloven Nose, Half-White, Bear Paw an' the others. Cuss the blue-coats, the eagle-boy, an' Devil Dick!"

A cry of rage welled from several throats at the mention of the deserting outlaw's name; it made the watchers on the knoll exchange significant looks.

"I'm in for a swear afore we go!" continued Powder-Face. "We took a big oath in these parts one year ago; but the soldiers made it too hot for us, an' I'm thinkin' that we forgot a good deal of that swear. Let's swear over."

This proposition was received with ejaculations of eagerness, and the few who had mounted did so and pressed nearer to their chief.

"Up with the shootin'-irons!" cried Powder-Face, and his red right hand shot above his head clutching a revolver.

Instantly his example was obeyed by his followers and ten "navies" were held above as many heads.

"By the Indian blood in our hearts!—by the souls of our dead Demons!—and by the blood on their breasts!—we swear never to sleep nor eat, until the blue-coats have given up their scalps—until we have a trail with no one left to follow it! The cry, Demons! not loud, but low an' terrible!"

As Powder-Face ceased there came from the throats of his band an approving cry, full of demonism and bloodthirstiness. It was not loud but distinct, withal, and the last that more than one of them ever uttered.

The echoes of the oath had not ceased to reverberate among the aisles of the forest when jets of fire, followed by sharp reports, leaped over the brow of the hill.

Bang! bang! bang! spoke the deadly repeaters in the hands of Wood-hawk Kit and the avenging boy, and the scourges of the upper Missouri fell around their chief.

In vain they attempted to retreat into the shanty. Their efforts only separated them and exposed them to the unerring rifles of the unseen foe, and revolvers fell from red hands stricken suddenly by death, and human bodies dropped in every manner from the saddle.

That terrible fusilade did not last three minutes. The repeaters were worked by hands that were accustomed to their use, and the effect told what destruction the much-condemned can cause when handled by competent persons.

The startling result of the fire was that Powder-Face found himself the sole occupant of a saddle, and that, almost, before he could recover from the consternation into which the sudden attack had thrown him.

His band lay in every position beneath his feet, some still writhing in the agonies of death, but the major part motionless and fast growing cold.

"The infarnal blue-coats have followed us!" he suddenly exclaimed, believing that Dingley's men were firing from the knoll, whose summit was now almost hidden by the white smoke of battle. "They've got their devilish work in! They've killed all but Powder-Face, who is goin' to live to pay 'em back!"

The spur struck his horse with maddening force as he uttered the last word, and the animal, snorting with pain, leaped over several dead Demons and dashed away. The other horses scattered in every direction, riderless and, in some instances, crimsoned with the blood of their stricken masters.

"The fiend thinks to escape me, Kit!" cried a voice on the hill, almost loud enough to have reached Powder-Face's ears. "Stay here, an' attend to the living Demons. He, the chief of all, is my prey."

Amid the smoke on the knoll the speaker, Little Death-Step, vaulted into the saddle, and then dashed like a thunderbolt down the declivity after the retreating scourge.

"Powder-Face soon saw that he was pursued;

a glance over his shoulder told him that the foe was bent on vengeance, and he urged on his steed determined on outriding the pursuer.

Filling the saddle like a born equestrian, and with fire flashing from the depths of the deep eyes behind the eagle's beak, Death-Step kept steadily on through the soft evening light. He carried the carbine in his right hand at a trail, while his left grasped the rein, and his heels urged his steed to renewed exertion.

The horse shot down the wooded trail, broad and easily discerned, like a cannon-ball.

"Heaven let me come up with the scourge of this beautiful land!" murmured the pursuer, as the outlaw seemed to be gaining on him. "Oh, let me have vengeance the butchery of the twenty trains that have felt his merciless hands! Let me take vengeance for my dead—for the blood of others dear to me!"

On, on went the pursuers and pursued, the boy at times leaning forward with that eagerness that would force the steed on faster by such action.

He saw only the fiend riding for that life which hung on the endurance of his horse; saw commingled in his heart all the bloodshed and woes which had desolated the frontier for years—a record of demonism without a parallel in the history of Dakota.

And Powder-Face seemed to realize his peril. The shadows of the evening hour, perhaps, prevented him from seeing the grotesque head that fitted the boy's shoulders as it had grown there. But he pushed on with all the energy he was capable of calling into play, leaping over logs that lay in his path, and caring little whether his horse led him.

The lips of the Demon chief, now the last survivor of his band, were compressed so tightly that little blood seemed to circulate beneath their skin; they were almost white.

"He is not going to escape me, thank fortune!" suddenly ejaculated Little Death-Step, for he saw that the distance between him and his prey had shortened perceptibly.

Powder-Face did not seem to be guiding his horse any longer, and the animal was making for the edge of the timber, not far beyond which rolled the Missouri. If the boy slayer could have seen the dilated nostrils and the wild eyes of the animal, he would have known that he was making for the current which he knew would quench his burning thirst and cool him off.

All at once a yell of rage pealed from the Demon's throat. He no longer doubted the identity of the pursuer bearing down upon him with the certainty of the swift-winged angel of doom.

"The eagle-boy!" shot from between his teeth. "He swore to see me in the death-agony. But he shall not! By the souls of my people! I will die when he is far away."

The cry of Indian defiance which floated over Powder-Face's shoulder to assail the ears of his foe, was full of devilishness. It might have prepared Death-Step for what was coming, for it could but tell him that the Demon chief was going to sell his life for the price of blood.

The foremost horse, foam-covered and with bloodied rowels, reached the rim of the bottom with a mighty effort. Strong of limb, as he was, he could not carry such a weight as Powder-Face at the top of his speed very long without rest.

Lee Wolf, the boy, rose in his stirrups, as the Indian's horse halted suddenly, planting his feet firmly in the yielding soil with an emphasis which said, "I will not go further!"

The burly figure of the red outlaw was plainly visible in every detail. Death-Step even saw the hideous expression of his face as he turned it upon him—a sight which he can never forget.

"Mine at last!" grated the boy. "Here ends the trail of the Missouri; here justice is meted out to the chief of all the Demons!"

The repeating rifle struck the youth's shoulder, giving emphasis to his sentence, and with the weapon pointed at the broad breast of the outlaw, he touched the trigger.

But there was no report; the hammer fell with a steady click, and not a puff of smoke rose above the gun.

"Oaks and cottonwoods! no cartridges!" exclaimed the boy, and he glanced at his belt to see it weaponless.

He had emptied his carbine among the Demons before Plotty's hut, and in his haste to follow Powder-Face had never thought of reloading. It was too late now; his horse, as if partaking of his intense desire for vengeance, never slackened his gait, but was bearing Death-Step straight upon the man, who, with a proud curl of his lips for his failure, was awaiting him, with a heavy revolver in each hand.

"Curse the empty chamber!" cried the boy. "I'm in for it now; but he shall yet feel the death that lurks in the arm of Lee Wolf! On, Medicine! on! I'm eager to meet the scamp."

The boy's left hand now grasped the rein again, while his right clutched the short barrel of the repeating rifle. He no longer stood up in the stirrups, a target for the aim of the Demon, but was lying against his horse's heated neck.

A few eager bounds would bring the bitter enemies face to face—for the last time.

Powder-Face had turned his steed's head almost full upon his pursuer. He stood erect in the Indian stirrups, with his red fingers on the triggers of the death-weapons, and his massive chest heaving with ill-suppressed desire and excitement.

Suddenly flash! bang! went one of his revolvers at the figure lying forward on the bounding horse, now not thirty yards away, and with the agility of a jumping-jack the body straightened in the saddle.

A yell of defiance, not unmixed with vengeance, accompanied the action, and Powder-Face saw the boy not only apparently untouched, but standing up

in the stirrups with the carbine, caught by both hands, lifted above his head.

The next moment one of the revolvers cracked again, and then the horses met.

"Now!" cried a voice from the eagle's head.

"Vengeance at last belongs to me!" It was in vain that Powder-Face, unable to use his revolver longer, tried to shrink from that uplifted gun. A deep exclamation of terror fell from his white lips, as he thrust out his arms to break the blow.

A bar of steel could scarcely have performed that service. The eagle-headed boy seemed to grow into a giant as he threw his body forward, and the butt of the heavy carbine came down with the irresistible force of a trip-hammer.

It dashed the iron arms of Powder-Face down as if they had been reeds; it flung his revolvers far from his hands, and struck him full in the face which was hated wherever seen. There was no cry to follow that terrible blow dealt with all the strength of two arms nerfed by vengeance; the scourge of the Missouri tottered for a moment in the last saddle he would ever fill, and then fell backward to bruise the leaves with his body and stain them with his blood.

There he lay still.

The dreadful blow forced the avenger back upon the saddle, and his horse bounded forward some distance before he could recover and bring him to a halt.

Looking back he saw a dark object on the ground where Powder-Face had fallen, and a horse with head turned was gazing upon it.

"I'll settle the question now," murmured the boy, riding back. "If he is a white man I'll know it."

A moment later he halted on the tragic spot and sprung to the ground.

Then his vow was fulfilled, for the terrible eagle-head looked down upon the chief of the Demons in his death-agony.

For a moment Powder-Face glared with dying eyes on the apparition, and then with a curse ringing over lips bloody and crushed out of shape, tried to rise, only to fall back—dead!

Near the banks of the Missouri, and among the golden leaves of autumn lay that merciless spirit whose history should be written in blood on a black page.

Little Death-Step gazed in silence for a moment upon the dead outlaw, and then opened his jacket of buck-skin. With more than boyish eagerness, he tore the garment open until the broad breast of his victim was exposed.

A moment's gaze satisfied the slayer.

Powder-Face was a veritable Indian!

"A good deal of money will change hands at the Government forts," said Death-Step, with a faint smile as he rose. "My work is nearly finished. The only one left is Devil Dick. Nina, I wish you were here to see my victory. Girl, my hopes are all blasted now, for you have told me in the night that you have united your fortunes to his. But he shall never boast of his victory over me—never!"

The boy's eyes glistened with excitement, and, with a bound, he again sat astride of his panting horse.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST TRAIL.

LITTLE DEATH-STEP had scarcely found himself firmly seated in the saddle again, when he heard a horse approaching at a smart gallop from the direction of Plotty's.

Although hardly believing that it could carry an enemy, he prepared himself for any contingency by cocking one of old Powder-Face's weapons; but a minute later he was pleasantly startled by recognizing the lank figure of Wood-hawk Kit, followed by his dog.

The greeting between the twain was most cordial, and the wood-hawk rejoiced to see the end of Powder-Face's career of crime in the stark and stiff body lying on the ground.

"Thar be bosses comin' this way. Hevn't you heard 'em?"

"No!" answered the boy, looking in the direction described by the wood-hawk's finger.

"Listen! I've heard 'em this long time."

It was plain to Death-Step that a party of horsemen were coming down from the north, and certain sounds told him that they carried the cavalry saber.

"It is Dingley's squadron," he said to Kit. "We'll not frighten them again."

Even as he spoke the several soldiers comprising the squadron came in sight, and were told to halt in a tone which Corporal Beall instantly recognized as Kit's.

As the troop halted, the two friends were astonished to see Dingley supported by two cavalry-men. The captain's chin rested on his breast, and his face wore the hue of death.

"The red witch did it!" grated Beall, replying to the anxious look which Death-Step and the wood-hawk threw from Dingley to his followers. "You may have heard that we burned her out, because she killed Tom Farley, one o' the best boys the service ever had. She said we should pay for it—an' we have! About an hour ago we war ridin' peacefully along, when who should jump right before us but the sorceress, an' the next minute poor Dingley got it square in his breast. He hasn't groaned nor opened his eyes since; but he isn't dead."

"Where is she?" asked Little Death-Step.

"Mashed into the ground!" answered the trooper, as his eyes flashed madly. "The shootin' o' the cap'n riled us, an' we rode over the witch, then re-

formed an' rode back, fur I tell ye a better man nor a kinder-hearted than Rashe Dingley never wore the blue. The surgeon that says he may live; but we must find a place to lay him down. Whar's Plioty's ranch?"

"Very near, thank fortune!" the boy-slayer said. "You'll find a crowd o' Indians outside."

The soldiers exchanged looks of amazement and chagrin.

"But it's the uncommonest quietest crowd in them parts," put in Wood-hawk Kit, with a cunning wink.

A few explanatory words followed and Dingley's men learned that they would never be called upon to fight Powder-Face and his Demons again.

"Thar's one left yit," continued Kit, "an' we're goin' arter him—Devil Dick."

"The scoundrel what rammed his pistols into our faces an' took the gal off," growled Beall to whom Devil Dick's success already narrated was not of the most pleasant character. "He an' Dingley used to be old cronies in the service; but Dick went too far one day with a bit of his ventriloquism, an'—"

"He a ventriloquist?" interrupted Death-Step, almost starting forward.

"Lor' you jest ought to hear 'em! Why he can mock anythin' that makes a sound; used to be a sort o' phenomenon in the service—"

"That's enough!" said the boy, stopping Beall's tongue which had a penchant for wagging whenever it could obtain "the floor."

Then he turned upon the wood-hawk and seized his arm.

"I see through it all now!" he cried, his brilliant eyes dilating with joy. "She didn't speak that night; it was that rascally outlaw ventriloquist."

"Fact!" said Kit, sententiously. "Clarer than mud, boy!"

The boy avenger was now rejoiced to believe that it was the exercise of Devil Dick's ventriloquial powers, and not Nina's real voice, which had almost turned him from her, and he at once declared his intention to follow the last Demon, and be a deserter, until he could despoil him of his captive.

Beall now in command of the squadron, offered to send some of the troop along; but the boy shook his head and said that he and Kit would "undertake the job."

"He's got a good start!" said Beall.

"But we'll ride him down if we hev to foller him to British America!" replied Kit.

The voice in the night was now explained.

Not long afterward the two parties separated, and Little Death-Step and his friend threw themselves upon Devil Dick's trail, while the squadron rode on to find shelter and rest for its noble leader, who we are happy to state was destined to recover.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking about, my orole! This trip is the longest you ever took without stopping, eh? Well, we're not beginning to reach the end yet; the Yellowstone isn't a stone's throw from where we started. We'd have been further along, and in a better country than this, if you hadn't been so impolite as to get sick down on the little river. You made me halt for a whole day. Thar's many a chap what wouldn't have stopped a minute, but I had some respects for your feelings, and, besides, my jewel, you're too precious to be roughly used. Come, brighten up! You haven't smiled since I took you from old Arvan's. By my heart's desire! you'll lose the art aforesoe long. If your eyes were coals o' fire they'd have burned your head off long ago."

There is but one character of our story who could utter such words, and he rode beside a beautiful girl along a low stream which helped to swell the current of the Missouri.

To his words there was no reply; his captive, for the cords that bound the fair one's hands to her side explained the relation which she at that moment bore him, wore a pale face; but the eyes which seemed to be looking far across the expanse of country, upon which the sun was going down, burned with an unnatural light.

One of her hands grasped the bridle, for the purpose of steadyng her in the saddle, but the right hand of Devil Dick was empty, and ready at a moment's notice to grasp it, too.

The outlaw was nonplussed by the girl's silence; to his speech he expected a reply, but as none came he bit his lips and looked madly at his captive.

"Oh, the time's coming when you'll be as musical as a bird!" he said, forcing a laugh from his scheming heart. "Nina, my dove, there are beautiful tepees on the Yellowstone, and when you become lady Hamilton—"

"Never that!" suddenly flashed the girl, turning a look of burning indignation upon the Demon. "You count your prospects before they're born, sir. Your wife not a living bride, at any rate."

Devil Dick was going to laugh boisterously, and make a reply compatible with his nature, when the horses prickling up their ears drew his attention.

"Something's coming up behind us. Injuns, mebbe!" he muttered.

The evening was still, and the wind blowing in the direction in which they were traveling had carried the sound to the horses' ears.

The girl, with a glance, noted the outlaw's change of countenance, and rightly connected it with the movements of the beasts.

Did she guess who were coming up behind? Ah! she could not have known, for she had no cause or reason for divining the truth.

But the idea that hastily formed itself in her brain added a new luster to her eyes, and with the abruptness of a thunderbolt, she wheeled her horse and shouting in his ears, dashed away, leaving Devil Dick beside the stream, a statue of surprise.

A cry of joy broke from Nina's lips when she realized that she had actually broken from the outlaw, and not caring who were riding toward her she continued to flee.

But an oath and the sound of hoofs told her that Devil Dick was trying to recover his escaped bird. Fiercely she addressed her horse, and the race grew exciting. She soon ceased to hear the sounds which had assailed her ears a moment before, and after all she might have been mistaken. But the knowing steeds?—could they have been?

"By Jove! I'll wring her neck if I catch her!" grated the renegade, as he dashed forward after his prey. "Does she know that I have the best horse? Did she think I was lying when I told her so?"

His cap blew off as he rode over the rolling ground and his handsome black hair streamed behind him like the black pennon of a pirate's ship.

He gained on her. Nina, hampered by the cords, could not make the progress which otherwise might have rewarded her efforts, and, besides, she bestrode the weaker horse.

"Hol hol!" came the devilish laugh of her captor, now very near. "All earth can't keep you from the Yellowstone country."

Another moment he was at her side, and his right hand went out to seize his prey.

But just at that exciting moment a jet of fire came from the shadows not far ahead, and the fingers never touched the girl.

For with a loud cry Devil Dick fell back, and a riderless horse dashed past Nina and disappeared.

The girl knew that her foe had fallen and tried to stop her horse, but could not; and it dashed on until it stopped suddenly between two horsemen whose hands touched the end of the bit.

"Lee! Kit! Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the girl.

The next day a trio seated on western horses drew rein before Wood-hawk Kit's cabin, and one, a happy-faced boy, clad in a close-fitting suit of buckskin, pointed forward at a knife in the door.

"There is the knife, Kit!" he cried, turning upon the worthy bearing that cognomen. "I said it should stick there till I was ready to remove it. I'll do that now, for my work is done. They sleep as they deserve, in bloody graves."

"And the frontier will have rest," said a pretty girl, the third member of the little party.

"Forever, Nina, I hope!" answered the boy, as he leaned forward and pulled the knife from the wood-hawk's door.

"I wouldn't hev teched the plaguey thing for the world, fur it bled when you put it thar!" said Kit, gazing at the blade.

"Bled, did it?" said the young avenger, with a laugh. "Well, you see, the handle is hollow, the head screws on, thus, and when you pressed it there must have been blood within it, and, oozing out, it stained your hand."

"I swan to gracious!" ejaculated the wood-hawk. "But, gal, what war you fur eight days? Couldn't hear anythin' ov ye!"

Black Van was my keeper then. Devil Dick took me there; but I saw my chance once, and made a strike for liberty."

"An' secured it, eh?"

"Yes; but at the cost of a life."

"Black Van's?"

Nina Morrow nodded.

We have now reached the end of our romance.

Wood-hawk Kit accompanied the young avengers to Fort Randall where he left them to tell the story of their vengeance to the garrison, and to become the observed of all observers.

Terribly had they paid Powder-Face and his Demons for the butchery of their relatives in the train a year and some months prior to the opening of our story, and when they entered the gates of Fort Randall, the eagle-heads disappeared forever from among the fertile cotton lands of the Missouri.

Kit Harefoot is still the wood-hawk that we found him; but he pursues his healthful calling without the fear of foes.

Not long since there was a wedding at Fort Randall, and Captain Dingley gave the bride away.

Here let us pause and write—

THE END.

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